160 Pages

LOVE STORIES OF THE REAL WEST

RANCH ROMANCES

NRA MEMBER U.S. WE DO OUR PART

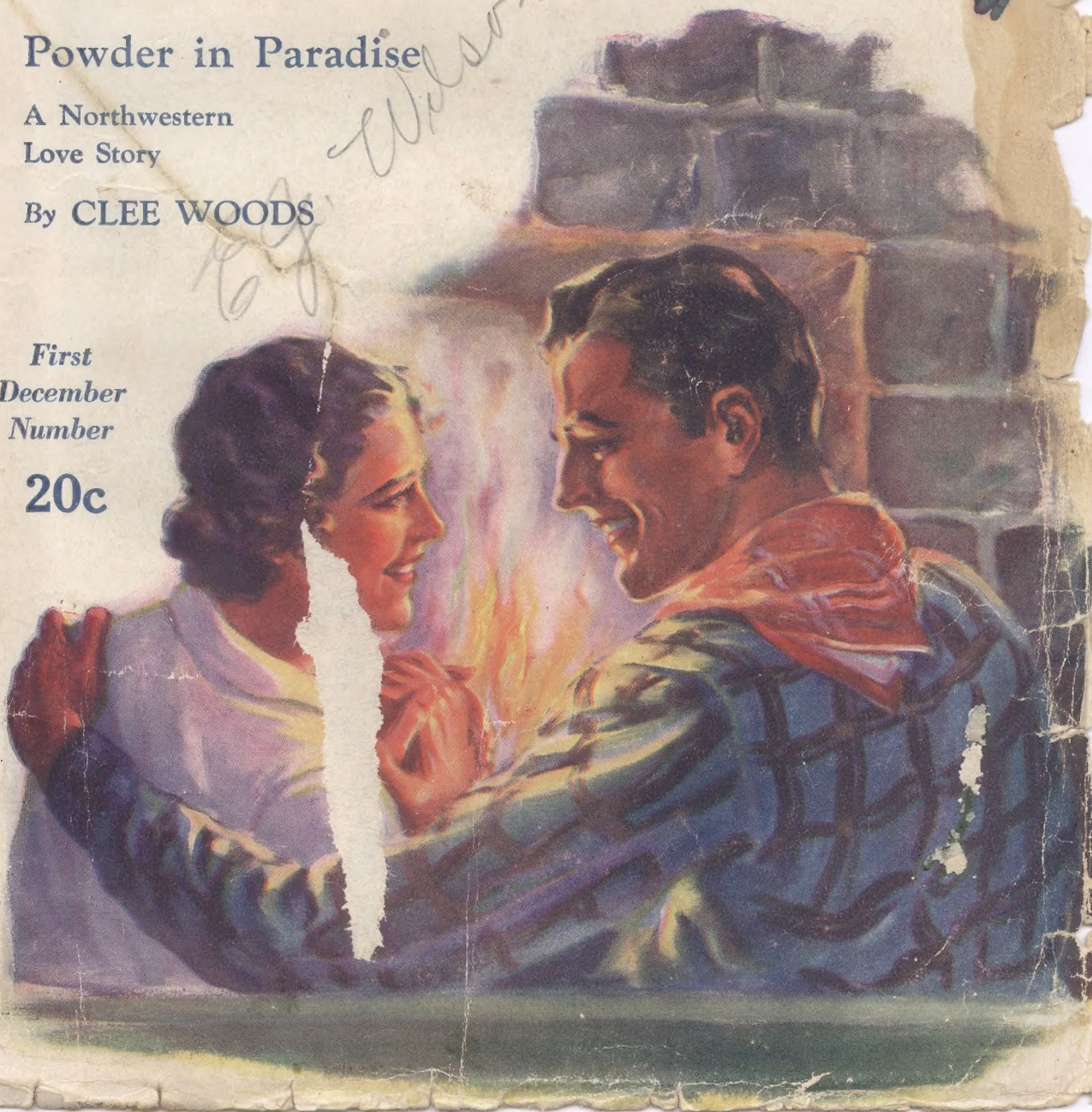
Powder in Paradise

A Northwestern Love Story

By CLEE WOODS

First December Number

20c



NRA MEMBER U.S. WE DO OUR PART

For a Real Merry Christmas!

ROYAL OFFERS THESE

SENSATIONAL JEWELRY VALUES

THE SAME FINE QUALITY — THE SAME LOW PRICES

Sent for $1 — Balance 10 MONTHS TO PAY

$29.75

$2.88 a month

HC-14 . . Elegantly hand pierced and engraved, 18-K solid white gold ring; dazzling, genuine blue-white diamond in the square prong center, FOUR smaller genuine diamonds on sides. Special price $29.75—*only* $2.88 *a mo.*

$27.50

20 GENUINE DIAMONDS — **$2.65 a mo.**

HC-16 . . All diamond wedding ring at our new low price—only $27.50. Richly hand engraved 18-K solid white gold; 20 dazzling, genuine diamonds. Exquisitely beautiful and very specially priced. *Only* $2.65 *a month.*

Both Rings for $32.50

$3.15 a month

HC-15 . . Perfectly matched, hand engraved 18-K solid white gold "step-effect" engagement and wedding ensemble at a sensationally low price. Fiery, genuine blue-white diamond in engagement ring—FIVE matched genuine diamonds in the wedding ring. A $45.00 value. Now only $32.50 for both rings $3.15 *a month.*

IF PURCHASED SEPARATELY

HC-15A . . Engagement ring only . . . **$19.75** $1.88 *a month*

HC-15B . . Wedding ring only . . . . . **$13.50** $1.25 *a month*

$17.95

$1.70 a month

HC-2 . . . A real gift for the "He-Man"! Modern step-effect 10-K solid yellow gold signet ring; brilliant, genuine diamond and 2 solid white gold initials in genuine onyx. Specify initials desired. Special price $17.95—*Only* $1.70 *a mo.*

6 DIAMOND BAGUETTE WRIST WATCH — **$29.75**

Only $2.88 a month

HC-11 . . . Exquisitely engraved, dainty, Baguette Wrist Watch, adorned with six fiery, genuine diamonds; fully guaranteed dependable movement. Lovely, barrel-link bracelet to match. One of the greatest values we have seen in years. Very specially priced at $29.75—*only* $2.88 *a month.*

STARTLING VALUES LIBERAL TERMS

This WILL be a *Real* Merry Christmas. America is looking forward and UP! Good times—Prosperity for all—are definitely ahead! And Royal—America's Largest Mail Order Credit Jewelers—in the spirit of the New Era offers these new and exquisite creations at sensationally low prices.

$1.00 ALL YOU NEED NOW! TEN MONTHS TO PAY

Just send $1.00, your name, address and a few facts about yourself! Age, occupation, etc. If possible, mention 2 or 3 business references. **No direct inquiries will be made—Your dealings with us kept strictly confidential.** No embarrassment—no "red tape"—no delay! We ship promptly, **all charges prepaid.**

10 DAYS FREE TRIAL

Take 10 days free trial! If you can duplicate our values anywhere, return your purchase and we'll return your dollar. If satisfied pay only the small amount stated each month. Surely nothing could be simpler or fairer.

SATISFACTION GUARANTEED

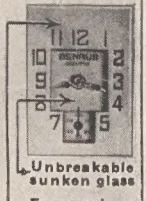
Written Guarantee Gold Bond with every diamond and watch. From start to finish your satisfaction is assured. Order today—it will be a long time before values like these are repeated. Buy by mail the Royal way and save!

$24.50

NEW BENRUS "IRONCLAD"

$2.35 a month

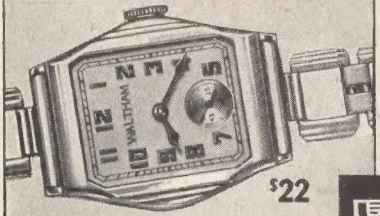
HC-7 . . . A great new wrist watch for active men! No more repair bills for broken crystals or bent hands. Numerals are countersunk right on the metal face; the smaller, sunken dial is protected with unbreakable glass. Guaranteed dependable and shockproof BENRUS movement; lifetime case; link bracelet to match. Specially priced $24.50—*only* $2.35 *a mo.*



$16.95

$1.59 a month

HC-9 . . . Elegantly engraved modern Baguette type wrist watch, white lifetime case; fully guaranteed movement; latest link bracelet to match. $16.95—*only* $1.59 *a month.*



$22

15 Jewel WALTHAM

Only $2.10 a month

HC-10 . . . Here's a challenge to cash or credit jewelers anywhere. Factory guaranteed accurate and dependable 15-Jewel Waltham; handsome, modern design, lifetime case; sturdy link bracelet to match. Our price only $22.00—*just* $2.10 *a month.*

ESTABLISHED 1895

ROYAL DIAMOND & WATCH CO. INC.

ADDRESS DEPT. 43-A
170 BROADWAY, NEW YORK

32 page catalog

FREE To Adults:

Hundreds of special values in genuine, blue-white Diamonds, Standard Watches, fine modern jewelry, silverware and cameras. Send for your copy today.

GO TO HIGH SCHOOL AT HOME

You can secure a high school education in your spare time by studying the new courses prepared by the International Correspondence Schools.

These courses are equivalent to the courses given in resident high schools. They have been specially arranged for men and women who wish to meet college entrance examinations, to qualify for a business position, or to make up the education they missed when forced to leave school too soon.

The College Preparatory Course, the High School Commercial Course and the High School English Course include English, algebra, ancient, medieval, modern and U. S. history, physiology, literature, geography, Latin, bookkeeping, drawing, geometry, shorthand, physics, chemistry, salesmanship, advertising, civics, trigonometry, economics, corporation finance, money and banking, business and trade economics, etc. A diploma is given at graduation.

The lessons are easy to understand and you will make rapid progress because you will be *in a class by yourself* and you will study under the guidance of instructors who are sincerely interested in you.

Just mark and mail the coupon and we will gladly send you interesting free booklets describing the High School Courses of the I. C. S. or any other subject in which you are interested.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

"The Universal University" BOX 2124-F, SCRANTON, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, "Who Wins and Why," and full particulars about the subject *before* which I have marked X in the list below:

☐ College Preparatory Course ☐ High School Commercial Course ☐ High School English Course
☐ High School Vocational Course ☐ High School Agricultural Course

BUSINESS TRAINING COURSES

☐ Business Management
☐ Industrial Management
☐ Personnel Management
☐ Traffic Management
☐ Accounting and C. P. A. Coaching
☐ Cost Accounting
☐ Bookkeeping
☐ Secretarial Work
☐ Spanish ☐ French
☐ Salesmanship
☐ Advertising
☐ Business Correspondence
☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering
☐ Stenography and Typing
☐ English ☐ Civil Service
☐ Railway Mail Clerk
☐ Common School Subjects
☐ High School Subjects
☐ Illustrating
☐ Cartooning

TECHNICAL AND INDUSTRIAL COURSES

☐ Electrical Engineering
☐ Electric Lighting
☐ Mechanical Engineer
☐ Mechanical Draftsman
☐ Machine Shop Practice
☐ Railroad Positions
☐ Gas Engine Operating
☐ Civil Engineer ☐ Mining
☐ Surveying and Mapping
☐ Steam Engineering
☐ Plumbing and Heating
☐ Architect ☐ Concrete Builder
☐ Architects' Blueprints
☐ Contractor and Builder
☐ Architectural Draftsman
☐ Structural Engineer
☐ Chemistry ☐ Pharmacy
☐ Automobile Work
☐ Aviation Engines
☐ Agriculture ☐ Navigation
☐ Mathematics ☐ Radio

Name.....

Street Address.....

City.....*State*.....*Occupation*.....

Persons residing in Canada should send this coupon to the International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada

On Sale the 2nd and 4th Fridays

RANCH ROMANCES

FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

Vol. LI FIRST DECEMBER NUMBER No. 3

LUCKY FEET ..... Floyd T. Wood 327
A Western Poem

POWDER IN PARADISE ..... Clee Woods 329
A Complete Novel

THE SHERIFF'S SISTER ..... C. Wiles Hallock 374
A Short Story

SCOTCH AND IRISH ..... L. Lindley Mulkey 381
A Short Story

HEARTBREAK RANCH ..... Herbert A. Woodbury 391
A Short Story

THE MASK ..... Charles E. Barnes 399
A Novelette

HER PERMANENT PROTECTOR ..... William Freeman Hough 416
A Short Story

HORNET HELP ..... Lucretia Whitehead Payne 427
A Short Story

THE TROUBLE-HUNTER ..... Paul Evan Lehman 437
A Short Story

SAY IT WITH SIXGUNS ..... Amos Moore 447
A Western Serial—Part Three

SHORTY CUPID ..... Eric Howard 463
A Short Story

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE 472
A Try-Your-Skill Department

TRAIL'S END CLUB 474
Photographs of Club Members

OUR AIR MAIL ..... The Readers 476
A Speak-Your-Mind Department

WHOM SHALL I MARRY? ..... Professor Marcus Mari 480
A Horoscope Department

In the Second December Issue

which goes on sale November 24

CANYON OF BLOOD AND GOLD

A NOVEL OF DESPERATE MEN

By ROBERT DALE DENVER

Single Copies, 20 Cents Yearly Subscription, $4.00 (In Canada, $4.50)

Issued semi-monthly by
WARNER PUBLICATIONS, INC.
578 Madison Ave., New York

ELTINGE F. WARNER, President
ELMER J. CHAMBERS, Vice-President and Treasurer
FANNY ELLSWORTH, Secretary

This Issue Dated December 8, 1933

Entered as second-class matter on October 10, 1924, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered as a Trade-mark in the U. S. Patent Office.

Copyright, 1933, by Ranch Romances.

Member Newsstand Group. For advertising rates address W. J. Delaney, Inc., 420 Lexington Avenue, New York; or The Wrigley Bldg., Chicago.

NEW LOW PRICES on GOODRICH · Firestone GOOD YEAR U.S., FISK and OTHERS

$2.15 29x4.40-21

SAVE ON YOUR TIRES

And we defy anyone to excel our quality. Every standard brand tire reconstructed by our superior, modern method is positively guaranteed to give full 12 months' service under severest road conditions. This guarantee is backed by the entire financial resources of an old reliable company. Member N R A. Today's lowest prices.

YOU CAN'T BEAT OUR PRICES

BALLOON TIRES

Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$2.15	$0.55
29x4.50-20	2.35	.85
30x4.50-21	2.40	.85
28x4.75-19	2.45	.05
29x4.75-20	2.50	.95
29x5.00-19	2.85	..05
30x5.00-20	2.85	1.05
28x5.25-18	2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
30x5.00-18	3.40	1.15
31x5.00-19	3.40	1.15
32x5.00-20	3.45	1.25
33x5.00-21	3.65	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.35

Reg. CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3	$2.25	$0.65
30x3½	2.35	.75
31x4	2.95	.85
32x4	2.95	.85
33x4	2.95	.85
34x4	3.25	.85
32x4½	3.35	1.15
33x4½	3.45	1.15
34x4½	3.45	1.15
30x5	3.65	1.35
33x5	3.75	1.45
35x5	3.95	1.55

All Other Sizes

WE WANT DEALERS

All TUBES GUARANTEED Brand NEW

SEND ONLY $1 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered. We ship balance C. O. D. 5 per cent discount for full cash with order. *Any tire failing to give 12 months' service replaced at half price.*

GOODWIN TIRE & RUBBER CO., Dept. 182
1840 S. MICHIGAN AVE. CHICAGO, ILL.

12 MONTHS WRITTEN BOND GIVEN WITH EVERY TIRE

FREE "RAY-O-VAC" Flashlight Lantern With Order for 2 Tires
Complete with batteries and bulb, ready to use. Household and automobile necessity. Gives 600 foot light beam. Adjustable handle.

MEMBER N.R.A.

Law!

STUDY AT HOME

We guide you step by step—furnish all text material, including fourteen-volume Law Library. Training prepared by leading law professors and given by members of the bar. Degree of LL.B. conferred. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 64-page "Law Guide" and "Evidence" books free. Send for them NOW.

LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 1275-L Chicago

GOV'T. POSITIONS

SALARY RANGE $105 to $250 Monthly

MEN—WOMEN

AGE RANGE 18 to 50

( ) Ry. Mail Clerk	( ) POSTMASTER
( ) P. O. Laborer	( ) Seamstress
( ) R. F. D. Carrier	( ) Auditor
( ) Special Agent	( ) Stenographer
( ) Customs Inspector	( ) U. S. Border Patrol
( ) City Mail Carrier	( ) Telephone Operator
( ) P. O. Clerk	( ) Watchman
( ) Matron	( ) Skilled Laborer
( ) Immigrant Inspector	( ) Statistical Clerk
( ) Typist	( ) General Clerk

INSTRUCTION BUREAU, Dept. 112, St. Louis, Mo.

Send me FREE particulars "How To Qualify" for future Government Jobs marked "X". Salaries, locations, opportunities, etc. ALL SENT FREE.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

Make me PROVE that it's EASY to learn at home to fill a GOOD JOB in RADIO

GET MY FREE SAMPLE LESSON
Mail Coupon

Increased Salary $1,000 a Year

"I am engineer for Station WAMC. My salary has increased $1,000 a year since entering Radio, due to your splendid training."
JULIUS C. VESSELS, Radio Station WAMC, Anniston, Ala.

Runs Successful Radio Business

"I am a member of the firm of South Grand Radio & Appliance Co. Without your training, I could never have been successful in Radio."
J. A. VAUGHN, Grand Radio & App. Co., 3107 S. Grand Blvd., St. Louis, Mo.

Does Radio Work in Spare Time

"Three nights a week I teach a Radio class. On the other nights I make service calls. Your training prepared me to earn nice sums of cash in spare time."
HOYT MOORE, R. R. 8, Box 919, Indianapolis, Ind.

Clip the coupon and mail it. I'm so sure I can train you at home in your spare time for a good job in Radio that I'll send you a sample lesson free. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand. Then you will know why many men with less than a grammar school education and no technical experience have become Radio Experts and are earning two or three times their former pay as a result of my training.

Many Radio Experts Make $40, $60, $75 a Week

It's hard to find a field with more opportunity awaiting the trained man. Why, in 1931—right in the middle of the depression—the Radio Industry sold $300,000,000 worth of sets and parts! Manufacturers alone employed over 100,000 people! 300,000 people worked in the industry. 16,000,000 sets in operation that need servicing from time to time! Over 600 great broadcasting stations. There's opportunity for you in Radio. Its future is certain. Television, short wave, police Radio, automobile Radio, loud speaker systems, aircraft Radio—in every branch, developments and improvements are taking place. Send me the coupon now. Read how easy and interesting I make learning at home. Read the letters from graduates who are earning real money in this fascinating industry. Read how I trained them in a few hours' spare time each week.

Turn Your Spare Time Into Money

My book also tells how many of my students made $5, $10 and $15 a week extra in spare time, soon after they enrolled. I give you plans and ideas that have made good spare-time money—$200 to $1,000 a year—for hundreds of fellows. My Course is famous as "the one that pays for itself."

Act Now -- Mail Coupon Below

My offer of a free sample lesson plus my 64-page school catalog is open to all ambitious fellows over 15 years old. Find out what Radio offers YOU without the slightest obligation. MAIL THE COUPON NOW.

J. E. Smith, President,
National Radio Institute,
Dept. 3-NM, Washington, D. C.

Mail this Coupon at Once

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 3-NM
Washington, D. C.

I want to take advantage of your offer. Send me your Free Sample Lesson and your book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." I understand this request does not obligate me.
(Please print plainly)

Name..... Age.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

R

Clean Out Your Kidneys

Win Back Your Pep

Good Kidney Action Purifies Your Blood—Often Removes the Real Cause of Getting Up Nights, Neuralgia and Rheumatic Pains—Quiets Jumpy Nerves and Makes You Feel 10 Years Younger.

A famous scientist and Kidney Specialist recently said: "60 per cent of men and women past 35, and many far younger, suffer from poorly functioning Kidneys, and this is often the real cause of feeling tired, rundown, nervous, Getting Up Nights, Rheumatic pains and other troubles."

If poor Kidney and Bladder functions cause you to suffer from any symptoms such as loss of Vitality, Getting Up Nights, Backache, Leg Pains, Nervousness, Lumbago, Stiffness, Neuralgia or Rheumatic Pains, Dizziness, Dark Circles Under Eyes, Headaches, Frequent Colds, Burning, Smarting or Itching Acidity, you can't afford to waste a minute. You should start testing the Doctor's Prescription called Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex) at once.

Cystex is probably the most reliable and unfailingly successful prescription for poor Kidney and Bladder functions. It starts work in 15 minutes, but does not contain any dopes, narcotics or habit-forming drugs. It is a gentle aid to the Kidneys in their work of cleaning out Acids and poisonous waste matter, and soothes and tones raw, sore, irritated bladder and urinary membranes.

Because of its amazing and almost world-wide success the Doctor's Prescription known as Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex) is offered to sufferers from poor Kidney and Bladder functions under a fair-play guarantee to fix you up to your complete satisfaction or money back on return of empty package. It's only 3c a dose. So ask your druggist for Cystex today and see for yourself how much younger, stronger and better you can feel by simply cleaning out your Kidneys. Cystex must do the work or cost you nothing.

Dr. N. T. ABDOU — New York Physician

New York Doctor Praises Cystex

Doctors and druggists everywhere approve of the prescription Cystex because of its splendid ingredients and quick action. For instance Dr. N. T. Abdou, New York, Licensed Physician and author of Medicine and Commerce, recently wrote the following letter: "It has been my pleasure to make a study of the Cystex formula. This prescription impresses me as a sound combination of ingredients which should be of benefit to men and women troubled with night rising, putrefaction of the urine, aching back in the kidney region, painful joints or stiffness—due to insufficient activity of the kidneys or bladder. Such functional conditions often lead to indigestion, headaches, high blood pressure, rheumatic pains, lumbago and general exhaustion—and the use of Cystex in such cases should exert a very favorable influence. Within 15 minutes after taking Cystex the color of the urine is changed and the irritating excretions expelled."—Signed, N. T. Abdou, M. D.

TOBACCO HABIT
BANISHED
FOR THOUSANDS OF MEN
QUICK, SURE, LASTING RESULTS

In most cases *Tobacco Redeemer* relieves craving for tobacco completely in a very few days. An absolutely safe, dependable, and thoroughly reliable treatment. No matter how long the habit, or in what form used, all craving for tobacco usually vanishes when this pleasant, inexpensive treatment is used according to simple directions. The treatment has helped thousands and should help you. Your money returned without argument or question if not satisfied. Write for free explanatory booklet and proof of what *Tobacco Redeemer* has done for men addicted to the tobacco habit. Send post card or letter today.

NEWELL PHARMACAL CO.
Dept. 600 Clayton Station St. Louis, Mo.

don't WORRY

ABOUT RUPTURE

Why put up with years of needless discomfort and worry? Try a Brooks Automatic Air Cushion. This marvelous appliance permits the opening to close, yet holds rupture securely, comfortably—day and night. Thousands report amazing results. Light, neat-fitting. No hard pads, metal girdle or parts to chafe or gouge. Patented in U. S. and 13 foreign countries. Try one 10 DAYS WITHOUT A PENNY'S RISK. You'll be delighted. Free book on Rupture and convincing facts mailed postpaid in plain sealed envelope. Address

BROOKS COMPANY, 599-M State St., Marshall, Mich.

GOOD YEAR
Firestone-Goodrich U.S. AND OTHER TIRES
DEALERS WANTED!
$2.15
29x4.40-21
SAVE ON TIRES
HIGH GRADE TIRES

You can rely on Chicago's oldest, most reliable rubber company for tire mileage at lowest cost. Increasing thousands of satisfied motorists all over the U. S. A. prove standard brand tires, reconstructed by Midland are best. Long, hard service on rough roads guaranteed.

50% TO 60% MORE SERVICE

BALLOON TIRES Size	Rim	Tires	Tubes	REG. CORD TIRES Size	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21		$2.15	$0.85	30x3	$2.25	$0.65
29x4.50-20		2.25	0.85	30x3½	2.35	0.75
30x4.50-21		2.40	0.85	31x4	2.95	0.85
28x4.75-19		2.45	0.95	32x4	2.95	0.85
29x4.75-20		2.50	0.95	33x4	2.95	0.85
29x5.00-19		2.85	1.05	32x4½	3.35	1.15
30x5.00-20		2.85	1.05	32x4½	3.45	1.15
28x5.25-18		2.90	1.15	34x4½	3.45	1.15
29x5.25-19		2.95	1.15	30x5	3.65	1.35
30x5.25-20		2.95	1.15	33x5	3.75	1.45
31x5.25-21		3.25	1.15	—All Other Sizes—		
28x5.50-18		3.35	1.15	ALL TUBES NEW		
29x5.50-19		3.35	1.15	GUARANTEED		
30x5.00-18		3.40	1.15			
31x6.00-19		3.40	1.15			
32x6.00-20		3.45	1.25			
33x6.00-21		3.65	1.25			
32x6.50-20		3.75	1.85			

12 MONTH WRITTEN GUARANTY BOND WITH EACH TIRE

FREE SET of NON-GLARE HEADLIGHT REFLECTORS
FREE WITH EACH ORDER FOR 2 TIRES

50% more headlight power; pierces fog; makes night driving safe

Send $1.00 Deposit with each tire ordered. Balance C. O. D. If you send cash in full deduct 5%. You are guaranteed a year's service or replacement at ½ price. Order today.

MIDLAND TIRE & RUBBER CO., Dept. 1325
1000-10 West Sixty-Third Street, Chicago, Illinois

FREE to BOYS

Sample Copy of OPEN ROAD for BOYS Magazine, 50 pages thrilling stories, pictures, sports, mystery, etc. Free membership in WINNIT CLUB, badge button, big outfit, catalog and new plan for getting easy money and swell prizes. Big surprise, too! ALL FREE! No obligation.

Write today to WINNIT CLUB F
Open Road For Boys
130 Newbury Street, Boston, Mass.

ARMY-NAVY Bargains

Haversacks	$ .75	Cart. belt	$ .60
Machete-bolo	$1.50	Flint pistol	$6.95
Army saddle	$9.85	M/L shot gun	$4.85
Springfield cal. 30/06 rifle, 24" barrel now			$16.50

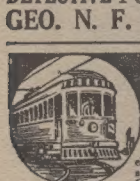
1933 catalog, 364 pages of pistols, armor, guns, daggers, etc., mailed for 50 cents. New special circular for 3c stamp.

Established 1865
Francis Bannerman Sons, 501 Broadway, New York City

Be A Detective

Make Secret Investigations

Earn Big Money. Work home or travel. Fascinating work. Experience unnecessary. DETECTIVE Particulars FREE, Write NOW to GEO. N. F. WAGNER, 2640 Broadway, N. Y.



BE A RAILWAY TRAFFIC INSPECTOR WRITE TODAY

OPPORTUNITIES NOW FOR RAPID ADVANCEMENT

Trained, Active Men—19 to 55—wanted for *Railway and Bus Passenger Traffic Inspection.* Interesting work; travelling or near home. We train you for this uncrowded profession in a few weeks with a simple, interesting, home-study course. Our record for 15 yrs.—*positions found for our graduates or tuition refunded.* Pay to start as high as $140 per month, plus expenses. Many graduates go on to executive positions in the Transportation Field. Write today for Free Booklet.

STANDARD BUSINESS TRAINING INSTITUTE
Div. 1312 Buffalo, N. Y.

U.S. GOVERNMENT JOBS

$1260 TO $3400 YEAR

Men—Women —18 to 50

Hundreds after depression Appointments

Mail Coupon Today—SURE

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. R273, Rochester, N.Y.

Gentlemen: Rush FREE list of Government big pay after depression positions, with salaries, hours, work, vacations and pointers on how to get a position.

Name.....
Address.....

BECOME A RADIO EXPERT

GOOD JOBS Learn RADIO-TELEVISION

ELECTRICITY - TALKING PICTURES - IN LOS ANGELES

A good job awaits you in 1934 if you train immediately. Enroll with National. 28,000 graduates. Qualify as a radio repair man; television expert; sound expert; broadcaster; station technician; electrician and for many other jobs. Earn room and board while learning. We help you get job. For limited time will allow coach railroad fare to Los Angeles. Send for free book which gives full details about different jobs you can qualify for, complete course of instruction and photographs of school operations.

NATIONAL RADIO & ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
Dept. NG-12, 4006 So. Figueroa St., Los Angeles, Calif.
Please send me your big Free Book on Television, Talking Pictures, Radio and Electricity. Also details of R. R. fare offer.

Name.....
Address.....
City..... State.....

BECOME AN EXPERT

ACCOUNTANT

Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn $3,000 to $15,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. Only 12,000 Certified Public Accountants in the United States. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C.P.A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Training under the personal supervision of William B. Castenholz, A. M., C. P. A., and a large staff of C. P. A.'s including members of the American Institute of Accountants. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession that Pays."

LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 1275-H, Chicago
The School That Has Trained Over 1,100 C. P. A.'s

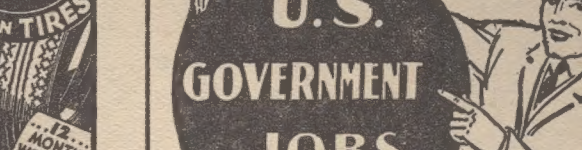
PATENTS FREE BOOK

TIME COUNTS IN APPLYING for patents. Send sketch or model for instructions or write for free book, "How to Obtain a Patent" and "Record of Invention" form. No charge for information on how to proceed. CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN
Registered Patent Attorney, 187-F Adams Building, Washington, D. C

GIVEN

Simply send name and address

BOTH GIVEN



SEND NO MONEY WRITE NOW

Boys' and Men's six-jewel lever movement Wrist Strap Watch with metal link bracelet or 22 cal. Hamilton Repeater Rifle with magazine holding from 12 to 15 cartridges. Merely give away FREE beautifully colored art pictures with our Famous WHITE CLOVERINE SALVE which you sell at 25c per box (giving picture free) and remit as per plan in catalog. Liberal Cash Commissions. Our 37th year. Be first. Offer limited. Write quick for order of salve. Wilson Chem. Co., Dept. 81-K Tyrone, Pa.

YOUR FOUR OLD FAVORITES
NOW ON SALE

ACTION STORIES — Fast moving, action stories of the great outdoors of the American West, South West and North West, Mexico, darkest Africa and the jungles of the Amazon.

Lariat STORY MAGAZINE — Cowboy stories of the cow country and the old West written by former cowboys, who have ridden the range and know their West.

Frontier Stories — Strong, colorful, adventure fiction by writers who know and who have lived in the South Seas, the Orient, the Arctics, Africa, South America and the world frontiers.

WINGS — Wings is the pioneer air story magazine, the trail blazer that introduced the great majority of present-day writers of stories of the air.

BUY YOUR COPY TODAY

THE KEY TO LIFE

ROSICRUCIAN MYSTERIES
FREE INTRODUCTORY BOOK

... explains the practical, useful, modern teachings of the Rosicrucians. (Non-Religious) Dignified, uplifting, mental and metaphysical principles easily used to overcome life's obstacles. Write for FREE book, "The Wisdom of the Sages," and learn how to receive this knowledge.

Address: Friar L. C. I.
ROSICRUCIAN BROTHERHOOD
San Jose (AMORC) California

ANY PHOTO ENLARGED

Size 8x10 inches or smaller if desired. Same price for full length or bust form, groups, landscapes, pet animals, etc., or enlargements of any part of group picture. Safe return of original photo guaranteed. **47c**

SEND NO MONEY Just mail photo or snapshot (any size) and within a week you will receive your beautiful life-like enlargement, guaranteed fadeless. Pay postman 47c plus postage—or send 46c with order and we pay postage. Big 16x20-inch enlargement sent C. O. D. 78c plus postage or send 80c and we pay postage. Take advantage of this amazing offer now. Send your photos today. Specify size wanted.

STANDARD ART STUDIOS, 903 W. Lake St., Dept. 593-W Chicago, Ill.

NO JOKE TO BE DEAF
—EVERY DEAF PERSON KNOWS THAT

George P. Way made himself hear, after being deaf for 25 years, with Artificial Ear Drums—his own invention. He wore them day and night. They stopped head noises and ringing ears. They are invisible and perfectly comfortable. No one sees them. Write for his true story, "How I Got Deaf and Made Myself Hear." Also booklet on Deafness. Address

Artificial Ear Drum

George P. Way, Inc., 737 Hofmann Building, Detroit, Michigan

BIG MONEY SELLING SHIRTS

AGENTS WANTED to represent old-established firm and take orders. Make Big Money every day selling Dress Shirts, Work Shirts, Neckwear, Underwear, Dresses, Hosiery, Smocks, Pajamas, Lumberjacks, Sweaters, Leathercoats, Pants, Play Suits, Overalls, Coveralls, Raincoats, Office Coats, Uniforms. Everything Guaranteed. Experience unnecessary. BIG OUTFIT FREE! Write quick.

NIMROD CO., Dept. 75
4922-28 Lincoln Ave. Chicago, Ill.

A Baby In Your Home

Scientists now state that "Complete unity in life depends on sex harmony" and that the lack of it is the one greatest cause for unhappy marriages. Also that every woman "has the capacity for sex expression" but too often she is undeveloped or suffering with general female disorders, which rob her of her normal desires. During an experience of more than 35 years specializing in the treatment of diseases peculiar to women, I developed a simple home treatment which has brought new hope, health and happiness to many thousands. Many who had been childless for years became proud and happy Mothers. Husbands have written me the most glowing letters of gratitude and now I want every woman who is run-down or suffering from female disorders to learn about this splendid treatment, and how she may use it in the privacy of her own home.

Get This Knowledge FREE

In my two booklets, which will be sent in plain wrapper, I intimately discuss many important subjects relating to the female sex that are vitally interesting to every woman. They tell how you too may combat your troubles as thousands of others have and often again enjoy the desires and activities of Nature's most wonderful creation—a normal, fully developed vigorous woman. I will gladly send both books postpaid free. Write today. **DR. H. WILL ELDERS, Suite 504-N, Seventh and Felix Streets, St. Joseph, Mo.**

Sleep well every night!

No more long, dreary nights of worry and wakefulness that destroy beauty and energy! A remarkable new, guaranteed discovery induces instant sleep that lasts all night, every night! Even the most obstinate cases are cured without the use of harmful drugs. Complete treatment sent upon receipt of your name and address and one dollar—if you act NOW!

SLEEP RESEARCH CLINIC
Dept. M Box 74 Denver, Colorado

FOREST JOBS

easily available. $125-$200 per month. Permanent. Cabin, hunt, trap, patrol.
Get details immediately
Rayson Service Bureau, Dept. K-52, Denver, Colo.

NEW HAIR OR NO PAY

Grow new hair, end dandruff, falling hair regardless of your age or sex. No charge if I fail. Barber, Beauty Shops recommend it. My booklet "Scalp Health" tells all. It's FREE.

CLARA BELLE ATKIN CO.
Suite K459, Sexton Bldg., Minneapolis, Minn.

Learn to MOUNT BIRDS

Be an expert Taxidermist. We teach you at home By Mail to mount Birds, Animals, Game-Heads; to tan skins. Mount wild game also common animals, squirrels, rabbits, frogs and pigeons. Big Profits in spare time.

FREE BOOK Tells all about Taxidermy—how to have a wonderful hobby and how to turn your spare time into Sure Profits. Free. Send Today. Don't delay. State Age.

N.W. SCHOOL OF TAXIDERMY 3039 Court Bldg., Omaha, Neb.

Lucky Feet

By Floyd T. Wood

YOU simply couldn't beat her; us waddies claimed she's sweeter
Than any lady teacher ma'am who'd held the job before.
Her cheeks shamed prairie roses; she knew the cutest poses;
Made all the ranch gals envious to see the clothes she wore.

She's livin' where I'm workin'; a heap of jobs I'm shirkin'.
I hang around the doorway like a houn' dog wantin' in.
At first I'm awful lucky; she calls me "dear" an' "ducky."
The way the signs wuz pointin', folks, a wife I'm goin' to win.

But one night when there's dancin' an' everybody prancin',
With fiddlers three a-fiddlin' in a room that's crowded full,
I don't know what's the matter, my feet jest sorta scatter,
An' 'fore I lead 'em back again I've made an awful bull.

A funny place for lovin' with twenty couples shovin';
But, gee, it's fun to kiss a gal whose beauty's like a rose.
First thing I know she's yellin', an' all the crowd she's tellin'
To fetch a crutch for her to use—I've tromped on all her toes.

From that day on she hates me; she never reinstates me.
She copped a lad from Circle M an' in the spring they're wed.
For weeks the clouds grew thicker; each mornin' I felt sicker;
I'd even priced some furniture an' now my dreams wuz dead.

One smile filled Bill with rapture; he wuzn't hard to capture;
All he can see is years of love, no hard spots to endure.
But gossip ghosts are walkin', an' way the folks are talkin',
The lad's now addin' two an' two, not feelin' quite so sure.

In fact they're all relatin', an' swear it's facts they're statin',
How a big an' healthy packrat stole a biscuit from Bill's wife.
He broke two teeth a-gnawin'; got all wore out from chawin';
He couldn't dent the pesky thing to save his doggone life.

So everythin' considered, I'm glad my dreams wuz widdered.
The larks are singin' songs again; the sky is blue an' fine.
Each day poor Bill gets thinner; it's me that is the winner;
I'll bet he's wishin' more'n once his feet wuz big like mine!

It was a maddening moment.

Powder in Paradise

By Clee Woods

She was called the Queen of God's Patio, and she held the hearts of men in thrall. But when the threat of a rebel band endangered the security of her valley, there came a cowboy who offered her his aid, but took her own heart as his reward.

CHAPTER I

Enchanted Valley

TWO swarthy men blocked the trail ahead of Jim Claypool, up there where it clung to the rock wall in Paso Alto. The men's rifles contrasted strangely with their peon garb of bell-shaped straw hats, cotton shirts and baggy breeches supported precariously by belts of thin strips of rawhide.

Claypool himself wore the workaday attire of an American cowboy—a big black Stetson, fancy-stitched boots, dark woolen pants and gray shirt, with an old brown vest hanging loosely over it. On his left hip was a long-barreled forty-four. Thrust down into his waistband at the left was a second Colt, a .38 Special on a forty-five frame. The cowboy was a fine specimen of outdoor manhood, rugged, tall, well set up, and not over twenty-eight. His tanned face was strong and virile, carrying too little flesh to hide the strong-set cheekbones and suggesting a certain fineness. His deep-set blue eyes looked out from beneath craggy, black brows in a kindly fashion. Yet they held a quiet suggestion of the aggressive warrior.

"Buenas dias, mi amigo," he greeted the leader of the Mexican guards. *"Porque no permiteme pasar*—why don't you let me pass?"

He spoke the Mexicanized Spanish like a cowboy whose school seat had been his saddle and the whole wide Border country his class room. This was below the Bor-

der, down in the heart of the high, jagged Sierra Madre of Mexico.

"No se permite—it is not allowed," was all the peon would say.

"All right," Claypool answered, still in the native tongue; "looks like I better turn around."

He started to twist his chestnut sorrel about. But the second his body screened his right hand, he brought the .38 Special whipping out from his waistband. The two amazed peons took backward steps and lowered the muzzles of their Springfields.

"Sorry to make trouble, hombres," the American said genially, "but I got mighty important business down there in God's Patio."

"They keel you, *caballero,*" the spokesman warned him. "One *Americano* ees go be shot een morning."

"That's just why I'm ridin' in at all costs," Claypool answered, "for that Americano is my brother. So you two boys had better not try to hit my trail. I might get plumb mad about it."

So warning the awed pair, Claypool took their rifles and rode on. Here the trail hung to a narrow ledge of the mountainside that was almost sheer granite wall above and below him. This was the eastern entrance to God's Patio, that mysterious paradise that lay hidden away there in the Sierra Madre Mountains.

Riding on only a little farther, Claypool looked down upon the enchanted valley that was not yet spoiled even by what little modern life had come to rural Mexico. On all sides the saw-tooth rims of mountains met the blue sky. The center of the valley floor was level, except where it was broken by hillocks or lomas here and there. Back toward the mountain walls, the hills rose higher and higher in the blue mist that hung over them. Great cow country!

Mexican cattle ran in there by the thousands. Some were graded up into good color with white-faced Herefords. Otherwise, the valley had been changed little in the past two hundred years, since an old Spanish family had established itself there and brought in peons to support the isolated colony in feudal style. Claypool could see a faint gleam of the white *hacienda* walls far down there now, through the foliage of trees that hovered about it. To one side of it lay the numerous houses of the headquarters peons.

What tragedies, what joys, what long lapses of blissful quiet that *hacienda* had seen! But, hovering over it now, even riding in with Jim Claypool, was the shadow of a new drama that was to tug at the heartstrings and gamble with human life more intensely than anything the little hidden paradise had ever seen before.

These things ran through the American's mind while he pulled the sorrel to a halt and surveyed the long sweep of valley, hills and mountains before him. With a backward glance that showed the two peons trailing him at a most respectful distance, he prodded the horse on.

Just within the next cove of the trail, he again pulled up short. An old red burro was coming along to meet him. On the creature's back sat a young woman, so dazzlingly beautiful that Claypool might have been justified in thinking that God's Patio was allowing one of its angels to escape. But, as he pushed his horse down nearer her, she became too real to be classed with any celestial beings.

Although her slender face had been caressed lightly by sun and wind, it shone very fair in the morning light. Her small red lips took a maddening little bow midway between tiny dimples on her glowing cheeks. Small, silver conchas on the band of her expensive, *charro*-style sombrero blended harmoniously with its soft, beaver-belly color. Her red shirt of fine woolen texture seemed to add luster to coal-black eyes that were large and soft and veiled with long, alluring lashes. From the waist down, however, her garb took on the aspect of the practical American cowgirl, with gray whipcord breeches covered by leather *chaparejos,* and black, fancy-stitched boots.

But for all her fresh, petite beauty, the girl seemed to have a mature bearing wholly beyond that of an American cowgirl at twenty. Her youthful face naturally wanted to smile, Claypool would have

said. But responsibilities even now had brushed aside some of its lightness. She was making a swift appraisal of Claypool without seeming to do so.

"Howdy, ma'am," he greeted, never doubting but what she could speak English. "Yuh lost, away off in here?"

She hesitated for a brief moment. Then she answered, with nothing but a slight rolling of her R's to give her an accent, "No, not lost, but just strayed a little. How did you get by the guards out there?" She glanced at the rifles that he still had with him.

"Oh, they let me by, with a little pursuadin'." He smiled knowingly and tapped the butt of his holstered forty-four. "Say, yuh been far down in God's Patio?"

"Quite a ways, yes."

"Did yuh hear anythin' about an American kid that was to be shot there in the mornin'?"

An ever-so-slight look of pain crossed her face. But she replied evenly, "Yes, everybody knows about that. Are you interested in him?"

"He's my brother, Hank Claypool. A Tarahumare Indian runner brought me word. I was on my little *rancho* over south of the Corralitos Range. I'm goin' into the Patio to try and save Hank. Yuh got any friends down in there, or a pull of any kind?"

"That Queen of God's Patio, as they call her, runs things with a high hand," she answered. "I don't believe any sort of pull will make her spare the American. They caught your brother cold, and he admitted having come in here as a Gardina spy. That revolutionary bandit is on his way to take over the Patio."

"But my brother was only a kid, just twenty-one. He hooked up with Gardina for pure adventure. He didn't stop to think what this invasion meant to a family that'd owned this Patio for two hundred years."

"I suppose not," the young woman commented rather sharply.

Claypool looked at her again. No, it could not be. She was no Mexican. That auburn hair showing beneath her wide-brimmed sombrero belied any thought of that. She had every other feature of an American.

"What kind of woman is this Queen of God's Patio?" he asked. "The Tarahumare told me she ruled the Patio with an iron fist."

"She does, señor."

"A regular little hellion, huh?"

"Some might say so, but I don't."

"Then yuh know her well?"

"Not so very well, I'm afraid."

"What's she aimin' to do about this revolution?"

"Keep them out."

Claypool asked about the two small divisions, each numbering only five or six hundred men, of a revolutionary army that had been waging the usual guerrilla warfare both in Sonora and Chihuahua. The rebel army was made up principally of Mexican brigands, with a few American renegades. Neither section had met with much success, and the Federal troops under wise old General Oñate had kept them from uniting. Now the plan of the revolutionary leader, Gardina, appeared to be that of entering God's Patio through its only two passes, this eastern one and the one at the northwest. Here the united force could hold the Patio until they could recuperate somewhat from their severe campaign. With the big herd of Cross L cattle down there and the food that the peons had or could be made to raise, Gardina could sustain his little army for months, until he was ready to sally forth again to riot and ruin.

"Such an army," the young woman added, "would strip this valley of everything, and leave it a sad wreck. Beef and bread would be the least of its losses, though. They would make our peons wretched, diseased, discontented. Now there are no happier people on earth than those quiet, peace-loving people down there."

She waved a hand back toward the great stretch of valley behind her. It lay there serene and blue, truly a heavenly retreat. But Claypool hardly saw it. He was looking at the girl again with closer scrutiny. Could it be, after all? He had imagined the Queen of God's Patio as a

stately, haughty woman of indefinite age, dressed in a long, flowing gown and with a big, jeweled comb in her hair. This girl, on the other hand, could have been a cowgirl anywhere north of the Border.

"What's the name of this Queen of the Patio?" he asked.

"Rita Logan," she answered his query. "She had an American father. Her mother was half English, half Spanish-Mexican. Her father, Jack Logan, died only six months ago. He left her the original Spanish king's grant of the whole valley intact."

"Would Señorita Logan know," he asked pointedly, "when a man is in mighty dead earnest about somethin'?"

"I think so."

"Well, I'd like to make her an offer. I'd like to fight for her and help keep this Gardina out, if she'd only turn my brother loose. Think there's any chance?"

She met his gaze frankly. Apparently, she realized that the cowboy had guessed her identity. A look of regret settled over her young face.

"No, señor," she ruled with finality, "Rita Logan will not interfere with the judge's sentence of death on Hank Claypool. He came to her in the guise of an American cowboy scouting for a big packing house buyer. As such, he won her friendship. When she found out that he was estimating her cattle and farm products for that rebel band, she ordered him brought to trial the same day. I am Rita Logan. No man can betray the Patio and live, if I have any say!"

The girl's voice lifted a trifle higher. In its mellow tones were both pathos and fire. She regretted the necessity of her duty, and at the same time held to it with patriotic and personal zeal.

"I love that valley, señor," she added, her voice falling lower. "My American father fought for it, and he loved it even as I do. I am sorry, but there is no hope for your brother!"

"And I'm sorry," he retorted, "but I'm goin' to make some hope for him."

He roweled his horse past her. She turned the slow burro, which she had been riding to rest her horse, and followed him. The girl betrayed no excitement at his apparent escape from her. When he had gotten only a hundred yards away from her, he realized why; for from the rock shoulders and ledges above and in front of him, armed men arose.

Rita Logan had been trained by her American father, and by several visits to his relatives, all "cow people," in Texas. When her father had died, she had defied Mexico's customs and proceeded to run her huge holdings herself. She had come up here to strengthen her guards in the mountain pass when she encountered Claypool. Now she rode toward him leisurely, while he looked up speculatively at the six men who had their guns on him.

"You can't go on into El Patio de Dios," she told him. "But I will allow you to go back to your *rancho*."

"Turnin' me loose?" he queried incredulously, looking back over his shoulder at her.

"On condition that you stay away from this valley."

"And leave my brother to face yore guns? Not me, señorita!"

With that defiant retort, Jim Claypool suddenly drove the spurs into his horse's flanks. That sent the sorrel plunging along the narrow trail, beneath four of the guards. Two armed peons blocked his way squarely in the trail. Giving the horse its head, he jerked out both guns and set them to spitting fire, one straight along the trail and the other upward at the four men.

The peaceful peons were utterly taken aback by the American's foolhardy charge. One of the pair in the trail leaped over the bank to a ledge. The other fell flat on his stomach, hard up against the rock wall. Those above jerked back behind their scant cover. Not a man fired a shot until Claypool was well past them. The cowboy had kept cracking bullets against the rocks near the terrified men, but he had not tried to hit anybody.

As he sped on, he twisted about in his saddle and whipped down first one gun and then the other, zipping bullets perilously near the guards. Their shots began to fly past him now. Then he saw the

girl herself snatch a sixgun from a holster whanged onto her saddle horn. Instead of firing wildly as the men were doing, she leaped off her horse and leveled the weapon across the top of a rock that thrust itself up at the lower edge of the trail. Strangely enough, Claypool feared that one shot the girl was making, more than all the other bullets that had come whistling past him. He would not fire near her, though, to divert her careful aim.

He could not even drop down on the side of his horse. To have done so on the inner side might have dashed him against the cliff wall. His weight on the outside might have caused the horse to sway over the brink.

Señorita Logan let her gun speak. But the leaden slug whined over his head. Claypool had the notion that she could have aimed truer than that.

His horse went dashing around a curve where the rock wall came to a sharp prong. The sorrel slid its forefeet outward, trying to stop. Claypool leaned far to the cliff side and grabbed for the branches of a scrub oak that clung to the rock wall. The forward impetus of his body tore his hands loose. But he checked the horse's momentum barely enough to save it from going over. He fell to the hard trail, then leaped up and regained his saddle. Before the enemy force behind could get around within range again, he rounded another curve at a safe speed, and headed on down into God's Patio.

CHAPTER II

Saddle Spunk

FROM here on, the American found that trail dropping constantly. Soon he was through the pass and heading down a mountainside. After more than a mile, he looked back and saw horses in pursuit of him. The animals had been tied some place off the trail, he reasoned. On one of them he could see the slight figure of Rita Logan. If their mounts proved fresh, he might yet have a hard time outriding them to the *hacienda.*

With that in mind, he sometimes left the winding trail and broke down over steep, rough ground that would have discouraged a deer. But, to his surprise, the girl took every short cut that he did, and with even more recklessness. After the second such mad plunge, her men apparently refused to risk their necks in any such loco fashion. The girl came on alone. But she never slackened her breakneck pace.

Claypool settled himself to a long, grueling race. It was twenty miles yet to the *hacienda,* at least. Down on Pie de Paso Creek, he sighted a number of range horses grazing. They were not large animals, but they showed a strain of the Steeldust and Morgan stock that Rita Logan's father had imported from Texas in order to grade up his saddle horses. Claypool picked a deep-chested bay with a short barrel, and began maneuvering the little band into a *rincón* of rock and cut bank, so he could rope the fresh mount without undue hardship on his sorrel. Over a ridge not half a mile away came the girl. But her horse, likewise, was worn out.

The range horses tried to dash by the cowboy, but he sent the sorrel speeding up so that he could make a throw with the short rope that marked him as a Texas-style cowboy. The loop whipped downward and caught both forefeet of the bay. Then Claypool swung off sideways, to throw the horse as easily as possible. While he was blindfolding the animal and easing on the saddle, Rita Logan came dashing into sight only a few hundred yards away.

Claypool got into the saddle and pulled the blindfold off the bay. For a moment the chunky horse stood still. The cowboy stuck the rowels to him and the bay tore loose with a vengeance. Failing to unseat its rider with a few terrific jumps, the horse turned spinner. Up into the air it went, only to come down with its hind feet about where its forefeet had left the ground. The fight became so terrific that the dizzy Claypool could not see the girl bearing down hard upon him. Clearly, she meant to recapture him before he got the horse subdued.

Suddenly, the bay stopped and went to sulking, with forefeet pushed forward and body leaning backward. Claypool roweled

and lashed, all to no avail. And there came that girl, with her gun ready in her hand. Fight as the cowboy would, the horse would no more budge than a balking mule. In order to avoid another clash with Señorita Logan, Claypool had to abandon the sulking horse and run for the cover of the timber that lined the creek. That put him afoot, but his own sorrel had gone to the water to drink. He might recapture it.

The moment he left the bay, it began trying to pitch the saddle off. The young lady rushed up beside it, leaned far out, caught the horse's bridle and pulled it into momentary quiet. Then, with the skill of one born to the American manner of riding, she slipped across into the bay's saddle. Claypool gasped at her rare courage. Evidently she intended riding that fresh horse to beat him to the *hacienda.*

But the blocky bay was too much for her. In only about three hard whirls it had sent her shooting off its back. Claypool went running to the girl as she hit the ground. She leaped up immediately, but he could see that she was in a daze. Her hand was clutching her gun as if in an instinctive gesture of protection. But as he seized her wrist and shook the gun to the ground, she regained her full senses and fought to break loose. He caught her hands in a bone-crushing grip and pulled her arms crosswise over her breast. This movement brought her nearer to him, and his blue eyes glared down into the fiery black of her defiant ones.

"It's a rather rough way to treat a queen," he apologized, "but I got to take yuh out of this some way."

"Don't mind me," she flung up at him.

She was spunky all right. And the mere touch of so beautiful a young creature sent the cowboy's blood racing in strange riot.

"All right, I won't mind yuh," he returned, "not until I get Hank loose. Fact is, I'm goin' to use yuh to free Hank."

"It might be dangerous," she warned.

"I know plumb well it's awful dangerous," he agreed, "and it's the first time in my life I've ever been afraid."

His words had a double meaning, as his eyes bored hard into hers. Her long lashes fell, as if she half understood his meaning.

"I'm takin' yuh home," he told her, "with orders, savvy, for yuh to free Hank for me."

"Orders, eh?" she flared back.

"Exactly."

He picked up her pearl-handled .38 Smith & Wesson, then let her go momentarily. He knew that she could not get far afoot, while he tried to catch a horse. The bay had turned its saddle and torn it to pieces with its hind hoofs, and neither his mount nor hers would let him get close enough to catch it.

"Looks like we're hoofin' it in," he informed her.

She made no reply, save to bring a look of scorn to her face. That angered him. He seized her roughly by one hand.

"Well, come on," he growled; "it's a good fifteen miles yet."

"The life of a rebel spy evidently has much greater value," she taunted, "than what gentlemen of my country have seemed to think before this."

"And," he replied bitingly, "my brother's life is worth more than any Mexican gentleman ever values any life."

He made his word "gentleman" just as biting as hers. He pulled her along for a short distance, until he could almost feel the burn of her pretty wrist in his grip.

"Let's cut out the loco stuff," he then suggested, releasing her hand. "I'm willin' to keep my paws off yuh, if yuh don't try to make a break."

"I'll make any bargain to keep your hands off me," she retorted.

He thought she was deliberately trying to make him angry. He smiled instead. He could afford to now, for he thought he saw a way of saving Hank through her. Besides, it was hard to be angry for long, at a spunky little warrior like her.

He put her in the lead, to prevent her from snatching one of his guns from behind. It proved to be a long, hard trek across rough ridges and broken bottoms. He took every cut that promised speedier arrival at the *hacienda.* But this cowboy was not used to walking, and, in a money

belt, he had well over six thousand dollars in gold, which weighed close to twenty-two pounds. To his chagrin, his cowboy boots began to pinch his feet woefully. Although he tried not to, he could not help but limp when blisters began to form on his toes and heels. The girl, on the contrary, seemed to stand the grind much better than he.

After a number of miles, he saw dust behind. Thus forewarned of the guards from Paso Alto, he pulled her back into a clump of scrub oak and prepared to waylay the men with the horses.

There they came, three of them now, riding hard. They had caught fresh mounts, too. He got set for the second surprise that he meant to hand them. But he had reckoned without the fighting little lass there beside him. She suddenly let out a cry of warning to the men.

"Get on to the *hacienda* and bring back help!" she shouted. "Tell everybody to—"

He clamped a heavy hand over her mouth. Her eyes gleamed triumphant defiance at him as the men fed spurs to their horses. This was a bad situation for him. It would not take long for the guards to bring a whole band to the girl's rescue. Heavier guards, also, would be placed over Hank until the moment of his execution. Possession of the young lady herself was his only hope.

"Yuh've brought this on yoreself," he told her angrily, taking his hand away from her mouth.

"Brought what on myself?"

"Bein' my prisoner till my brother is turned loose."

"You'll never get that brother alive!"

"Then," he vowed, "they'll never get yuh back. I promise yuh that, woman. Yuh don't know what Hank means to me. Our mother died when he was only two years old. I had to take care of 'im for years durin' the daytime, while our dad was out on the range. See this?"

He pointed to a scar on his right jawbone, that added to the rugged contour of his bronzed face.

"I got that takin' the kid's part in a gun scrap, when he was only sixteen and tried to beat a Rafter Nine waddy's time with a little filly over in Lordsburg."

"He's always been a ladies' man, then?"

"What makes yuh ask that?"

"Nothing. And the gunfight, is that why you crossed the Border and stayed in Mexico?"

"Yes'm," he admitted apologetically, "but that Rafter Nine cowboy and four of his pards were smokin' Hank up when I horned in. Let's go on with this *pasear* for the *hacienda*. I want to be near enough to deal with whoever has charge of Hank's execution."

"The sheriff will do whatever the judge tells him. Judge Adolfo Martinez y Madero passed the sentence."

"*You* passed it, it seems," Claypool countered, "and the judge okeyed yore orders. But yuh'll send 'im some new orders about that shootin' of Hank."

"So *you* say," she retorted.

CHAPTER III

Trouble Guns

FOR two miles they trudged along in silence. The girl seemed willing enough to keep moving toward her home. She even stepped up briskly when his cowboy feet began to punish him still more.

"Uh-huh," he thought to himself, "the little sprout thinks she'll wear me out, then outrun me, mebbe."

Much as he wanted to go slower, he would not give her the satisfaction of telling her he couldn't keep up. He had to keep close on her heels, for fear she might break away. That task grew harder and harder as she gradually lengthened her stride and its tempo, and his feet grew more weary and the blisters spread.

As they drew nearer, he told her to get off the road onto which they had come, and keep to the hills more. A little later he saw several riders fogging along the road. He halted his captive and stepped up beside her, to make sure this time that she did not make an outcry to the men rushing to her rescue. They remained here while many more riders passed, on all manner of mounts, from graded Steeldust horses to old burros and even saddle steers. Clay-

pool avoided them all, and kept the girl headed for her home. From here they trudged on to a little hill only half a mile from the big, spreading *hacienda.*

"I'll turn yuh foot loose," he proposed, "if yuh'll promise to send my brother back to me with a pair of good horses, and give us five minutes' start."

"I'm making no bargains," she answered. "It's up to you to make the next move, not me."

It was a clear challenge. By it she told him that she neither feared his wrath nor would make the least surrender. He feared that she knew Hank would be executed on time, no matter whether she were rescued by that time or not. He decided on a bold move indeed—to go right into the *hacienda,* where he could negotiate directly and without delay for Hank's release. If worse came to the worst, he would be able to fight his way to Hank's cell and turn him loose—maybe. Anyway, now was the best time to try it, while so many men were hurrying off to the rescue of the captured girl. He therefore proceeded with the hazardous journey, keeping Rita close by his side.

He circled about a little, to come in from the back way where an orchard promised good shelter for the last two hundred yards to the house. As they bore on, Rita again quickened her pace. This time she cast a half knowing smile at him, as if she were sure he must swallow his pride and admit he could not maintain such a gait. But he gritted his teeth and let the blisters do their worst. When they got within a short distance of the orchard, she waved a hand gracefully toward it.

"What a pity we have to fight at a time like this," she murmured.

She turned a devastating smile upon him, then looked back wistfully at the orchard whose apple, peach and cherry trees bespoke American planning. The regular rows of big apple trees were in full bloom, making them look like huge balls of delicate pink and white. To Claypool's nostrils came the rare fragrance of the springtime fairyland. Back beyond the great blanket of bloom was a tile roof and a small portion of an upper story wall, with an iron-grilled window peeping through a fluffy break in the tree tops. Bees hummed through the warm air; chickens cackled and crowed; birds gathered grass, hairs and feathers for new nests in the trees.

How fittingly this refuge from a harried world had been named El Patio de Dios, God's Patio. The significance of that name is better understood when it is remembered that "patio" means a back courtyard, where a Mexican family spends its more intimate hours. To the peons, only intimate Divine Presence could account for the beauty, peace and plenty of their paradise.

Jim's gaze came back to the lovely young face there beside him. Rita seemed to be the very essence of all and he did not seek to break the spell by moving on. Apparently, nobody at the house had as yet discovered their presence.

"Do we have to fight?" he asked, with a catch in his throat. "I mean, you and I?"

She met his rapturous gaze with the full force of her own soft, black eyes. At that moment she seemed to him unearthly, so startlingly beautiful was she. All else was unreal, a strange dream, even his weary legs and blistered feet.

"Yes, we do," she answered.

As if to give him the rudest sort of awakening, she suddenly changed from an ephemeral nymph to a thing of alert action. She darted away before he was aware of her intent. He sped after her, but his worn legs and suffering feet brought him back to earth still more abruptly. There, ahead of him, that supple little body was skimming over the ground faster than he could possibly run.

He cursed himself inwardly for being such a dupe. He had let her cast over him a sort of mesmeric spell, by the tantalizing splendor of her home and herself. And she had done it deliberately, he believed, to throw him off his guard until she could get beyond his clutches. Now she was gaining inches on him at every dull pound of his boots on the ground. Her escape would put him in the gravest danger. For, without her as a pawn for his own life and with him exhausted here at her back door, they could hunt him down

in short order. It would probably mean a double execution in the morning, too, when they caught him.

But turning about would do no good now. He was not the kind to run in the face of defeat, anyway. He therefore raced after her with every ounce of strength he had left. She kept gaining, and did it so confidently that she did not even make an outcry for help. He realized that she had not contemplated such a possibility as his shooting her.

"I might fool yuh, yuh little vixen," he thought to himself, while he still kept up the losing race.

That thought gave him a new idea. A bunch of cattle stood about the watering trough just outside the gate that opened into the orchard. A curly-headed bull was licking at a block of salt. She would have to pass only a short distance behind the creature, to reach the gate. Claypool jerked up his gun and sent a bullet whacking into the new block of salt. The crack of the missile, so close to the end of his nose, made the bull whirl and break away in flight. He took nearly three dozen cattle back that way with him.

For a moment the girl's path to the gate was blocked. She must have thought that the American had been so ungallant as to fire at her. She hunched down low and tried to dart across to get some of the cattle between herself and him, but she was not fast enough. The cattle charged on past her. In trying to gain their protection from the imaginary danger, she had veered off at an angle from the gate. The moment the last animal swept by, she cut back for the gate with a burst of speed that betrayed desperation.

But Claypool was bearing hard for it himself. He had less distance to go than she. He was beating her to the goal, and could certainly catch her if she tried to climb over the high stone fence that surrounded the orchard.

With a last burst of speed, she darted up. It looked as though they both would reach the gate at the same instant. But the girl suddenly threw herself forward like a baseball player sliding, feet first, into second base. Her boot tripped him neatly. Even while he was sprawling into the dust, she leaped up nimbly and darted through the gate. Spitting dust savagely, he sprang up and raced after her through the orchard. His anger now gave him new strength.

The best he could do, though, was to keep within ten paces of her for most of the distance to the house. Then again she began pulling ahead. By this time the shots had spread excitement through the dozen men who had been collecting as a new posse to go to the Señorita's rescue. Claypool had no illusions about the trouble into which he was running. But he tore right on after the girl when she darted through the opposite gate and into the patio of the great old house.

Claypool intended following her into the house, still hoping in his desperation to overtake her. But men were rushing around the corner of the building. They took one swift look at the American in pursuit of their Señorita, then brought their rifles swinging up. They would cut him down before he could reach the door into which the girl was darting. He had to do something.

Just off to one side, stone steps led down to a basement door. That heavy wooden door was narrow, and it had numerous iron strips nailed across it. Claypool suddenly changed his course and dived for the outside steps. It was well he did, for two bullets raked through his shirt bosom as he checked his forward course. Other leaden balls missed entirely as he rolled over into the opening.

But just then the heavy door flew open and a man poked a cautious head out to see what was going on. Naturally, he looked up first. That loss of a fraction of a second let Claypool flash his gun onto the man, who carried a rifle in his hand. The Mexican dropped the gun and slammed the door shut, in spite of Claypool's hasty warning.

The cowboy jabbed a foot against it, though, and knocked the door open slightly before the man inside could throw a heavy bar into place. Then he fired into the wood rapidly, while he slapped both feet against it, braced his back against a step

and heaved. For a moment the man within tried to hold the door shut, braving the danger of a bullet passing through. But, braced as he was, Claypool had the advantage. The door gave way, and the individual inside threw his hands up in token of surrender.

Again Claypool was barely in time. The men who had driven him down onto the steps were venturing close when he did not show his head above the ground level to fight them. He sprang into the room, though, before one got a shot at him.

Not greatly to his surprise, he found himself in a basement prison, the only jail in the whole valley. This one consisted only of a narrow outer room and a smaller cell beyond. Within the cell stood Hank, a tall, rather slender youth of frank good looks. Wall chains were about his wrists and ankles. In spite of the chains, however, they had kept this guard over him. That showed how determined was Rita Logan to see that he paid for his treachery to El Patio de Dios. Just now, though, the guard stood with hands high over his head and a look of fear in his dark face.

"Shut and bolt that door," Claypool ordered him.

"Jim, yuh old shootin' fool!" Hank exclaimed. "How'd yuh get here?"

"Oh," Jim answered in rather brittle words, "I just got to wanderin' around in fairyland. The big question now is, how do we get out?"

That question kept getting more serious. Through the one narrow, high window, Jim could hear the excitement outside increase as new men arrived. No matter what their numbers, though, they could not break into the prison without serious loss in the inevitable fight. But the besiegers did not have to risk a single life. With neither food nor water down in the dungeon-like place, Jim saw that it was only a matter of time before he and his brother would be starved out. Until then, however, he intended giving them something to think about.

Secure for the time being from outside interference, he made the guard take out a key and unfasten the big old padlocks that held Hank's chains. Then he put the guard into the chains and gave Hank one of his own guns. For some strange reason, he did not offer Hank the .38 Smith & Wesson which he had captured from the girl.

"Well," Hank wanted to know, "do we fight our way out before they get as thick as fleas on a dog's back out there?"

"We're not goin' out that way, Hank," Jim replied, "unless they absolutely force us into it."

"What's the matter, gettin' cold feet?"

"No, but mebbe there'll be some better way. They'd get us both anyway, us goin' out behind blazin' Colt muzzles. Fact is, I fetched a cool six thousand two hundred dollars along, in gold, to take the place of lead."

"To get American gold," Hank returned with boyish repentance, "yuh must've sold out everything yuh had for a fraction of what it was worth."

Although Jim did not confirm Hank's conjecture, actually, to get this American gold he had sold out to a big American lessee on the old Corralitos ranch for six thousand dollars when his modest herd was worth at least twenty-five thousand. It was bad enough to take such a loss. But the sale meant quitting cold in a range fight Jim had been making with the American to whom he had sold. Nothing short of Hank's peril would have made the fighting cowboy eat that humble bread.

"Now," Hank went on, "the gold is no good. If yuh offer it to them, they'll know that they can get it anyway—off our bodies after we starve to death."

Jim nodded agreement. With eyes that seemed to have forgotten the Mexican guard, he noted that the man was listening intently to their talk. This told that the guard understood English.

Seeing this, Jim deliberately said, "No Mexican up in here can *sabe* English, so we can lay our plans now. First, we'll send this guard out with word we want to buy our way out. With him gone, we'll tear loose the stones that hold the window bars in place. Soon as it gets dark then, we'll slip out, takin' our gold with us."

"Sounds good," Hank approved, "if we can only get the bars loose."

"That's the only drawback," Jim agreed.

Jim turned upon the fettered guard, saying in Spanish, "You go tell the judge to come near enough to talk business with us."

"Si, sí, señor," the guard agreed. *"Con mucho gusto,"* and he grinned at his own joke.

They let the man out the door without exposing themselves to the fire of watchful besiegers. Hank seemed thoughtful after that. Jim sensed the fact that his brother was withholding something from him. He was on the point of mentioning it when there came a low knock at the door.

"It's Boots," Hank exclaimed. "I've been hopin' she'd come."

"Who's Boots?"

Hank grinned. "Oh, I nicknamed Rita Logan that the first day I visited at this *casa* of hers. Her boots are so little they needed all the rest of her to deserve a name."

Devil-may-care Hank laughed again lightly. That was like him, to bestow such a nickname on the proudest little belle of all Mexico. He opened the door a few inches. Instead of Rita, there stood Judge Adolfo Martinez y Madero. He was a fine-built man of handsome appearance, with curly black hair and the lighter complexion of the ruling class in Mexico. Jim thought he must be thirty-odd years old. He wore the fanciest sort of *caballero* dress, from black sombrero with flat crown and gold-braided band, to wide-bottomed *pantalones,* also highly braided. He even had a gay *serape* thrown across his shoulders. Just now his brilliant black eyes had a friendly look.

"Gentlemen," he began, in somewhat broken English, "the guard say you have beeziness to talk."

"Yes," Jim answered, coming to the door also, "I thought yuh might let my brother off with a stiff fine. Dead, he'd do yuh no good. Let 'im go, and I'll see he never troubles this valley again. A thousand-dollar fine in American gold would help out here, no?"

Jim knew that his proposal was only a polite way of offering a bribe. His estimate of the young judge did not place him above this weakness of many Mexican officials.

"One thousand dollars?" Martinez echoed. "That ees leetle money for man's life, señor. Ten thousand ees better."

Martinez seemed in a great hurry, but he could not resist the temptation to drive a bargain. On the other hand, Jim had no intention of giving him a dollar. He did not believe the man would keep any agreement he might make for their escape. What he did seek to do was to make Martinez feel certain that they relied on going out through the window at dark. He therefore rejected all prices that Martinez named, and ordered him away.

"All right," Martinez growled in disappointment, "that ees bad for you. Gold ees no good to dead mans any time. You never get bars out that weendow, señor."

With that taunt, Martinez strode back out of the truce zone. Jim looked at Hank and smiled grimly.

"That crook wanted to graft a few thousand from us, then kill us for givin' it to him," he said.

"He certainly would have killed us, all right," Hank agreed, "for he knows he could never let us speak to Rita Logan about his takin' a bribe. He's loco over that girl."

Hank almost gritted out those last words. Jim saw a peculiar look on his brother's face. It was apparent that Hank had no relish for the Mexican's adoration of Rita Logan. Neither brother said anything more as they set to work trying to remove the bars from the window.

Martinez had been right; those bars were set too deep in the heavy stone for a man to tear them out with anything less than a saw or crowbar.

"Mebbe we'd better risked a bargain with that scamp, anyway," Hank said regretfully.

They continued to busy themselves about the window. Jim made barely enough noise for the besiegers to discover the work. They had not been at the task long when Rita Logan appeared in the patio, across from their window. Martinez was with her, and he was all attention to her. The girl wore a lovely velvet dress of deep

wine color, which set off to startling advantage her fair skin and dark, wavy hair.

"Mr. Jim," she called, "I'll still turn you loose if you'll give me your promise to get out at once."

"Without Hank?"

"Certainly, without him."

"Nope, I'm stayin', ma'am."

"Go on, Jim," Hank urged. "Better just one than both of us."

"They haven't got either one of us yet," Jim replied.

Rita tried to urge upon Jim his freedom. When he refused again, Martinez took her hand and pulled her away, at which Hank muttered a low curse.

CHAPTER IV

Reckless Adios

AFTER a silent ten minutes, the two brothers set to work on the bars again. Hank reminded Jim that he was too careless in the noise he made. Hours passed and darkness came on. Still they had accomplished nothing with the heavy iron bars. Then, to their amazement, a bundle was thrust through the window where they had raised it for air. On the outside was a note. The bundle contained a small saw. Jim quickly struck a match to read:

> "Saw out, and hurry. Nobody watching the window.
>
> A Friend."

"Boots is tryin' to save us," Hank declared warmly. "I looked for somethin' like this."

"Is that her handwritin'?" Jim asked, striking another match.

"Never saw her writin'," Hank answered. "But who else would do this for us?"

"Martinez might want us to come through that window," Jim replied.

"Yo're crazy," the impetuous Hank charged. "How could Martinez know anythin' about our plan?"

"That guard understood every word I said," Jim replied. "I intended him to, and now I'll bet not less than twenty hombres are waitin' for us out there with hungry gun muzzles. Which means we're makin' our break through the door and not the window."

"Jim, I call that brains!" Hank exclaimed. "Still, it looks to me like this saw and note come from Rita."

"If so," Jim told him, "she's in on the deal to murder us as we come through. Put your ear to this window."

Hank listened with his brother. Not a sound did they catch until there came the faintest sort of rustle against shrubbery leaves. Then one of the waiting besiegers sucked in his breath in a suppressed yawn. That was enough. The Claypool boys set the saw to work on the bars. Nor could they be in too big a hurry. They actually did cut one bar out. But at least three would have to be removed before either man could go through. Jim worked on for a while.

"All right, she's big enough for us to get through," he then announced, in a whisper just loud enough to carry to the nearest ears in the patio. "I'll go first, then you. Got yore *pistola* handy?"

"Sure, go ahead."

Instead of carrying out the plan thus promised by their words, though, the cowboys eased the door back and made a run for it through the darkness. However, the door had not been left entirely unguarded. A throaty cry went up, and a gun roared. Two more guns streaked out hasty flames. But the Claypools ran on for the stone fence. Surprised men came dashing around the corner, shouting excitedly.

There was no time for the cowboys to find the gate. They glided along the fence toward the front of the house. Jim was looking for a place over which to vault, when Hank seized him by the shoulder and pulled him toward the house. Hank got him to following, then turned him loose and sprang through a low window.

"Where on earth are you goin'?" Jim demanded.

"To say *adios* to Boots," the reckless Hank answered.

"But they'll shoot us down like dogs!" Jim objected.

"Who cares? I've got to see that little

filly. Want to square myself with her, anyway."

While confusion reigned outside, Hank bounded up a wide stairway. Jim felt that he wanted to stay with his adventurous brother, no matter what peril it led to. Yet he did not follow. A keen, swift pain had shot through his breast. Hank was in love with Rita Logan! And even when the proud queen of the valley had been unwilling to spare his life! Under such circumstances, a farewell was not for a third party to intrude upon. But Jim's big hand was gripping the iron railing so hard that his fingers tingled with pain. In the dim light that came from a room above, Hank was disappearing down a hallway.

Excited men were rushing all around the house. Some were even thumping into the lower back rooms. Their near approach made Jim retreat up the stairway. As lanterns began to gleam about the place, Jim had to dodge on up into the hallway above.

He stopped dead still at the head of the turn in the great stairs. Down the hallway, Hank had encountered Rita. He had both her hands in his, and was making an earnest vow to her. Rita seemed frightened more at what he said than at the cries that arose from all angles below. There came a lull of a few seconds in the shouts and the thump of running feet.

"—and I'm comin' back, girl," Hank was saying, "because I'm just that plumb loco over yuh!"

Rita cast a despairing glance at Jim. He turned his back on the pair, but he was so paralyzed by the sight of Hank's lovemaking to Rita that he could hardly make his feet move. Rita seemed to find her voice for the first time.

"Go right ahead with your gringo nerve!" she invited Hank, her voice bitter. "It's an easy way for me to hold you till my men come!"

"But I tell yuh," Hank vowed hotly, "that I had turned against the rebels and was for you, when yuh found out why I'd come in here. I'd turn against anybody in the world for yuh, Boots."

"A traitor first to me, then to your comrades!" the girl exclaimed in mocking voice. "How proud I ought to be of your love, kind sir!"

Stung by her words, Hank flung her hands aside and strode back toward Jim. Men were in the hall below, with a lantern. But the searchers crouched close in by the wall, for Jim was standing them back. Strange indeed what tasks men sometimes set for themselves. Instead of running for his life while there yet was time, Jim Claypool was standing the advance force back, while Hank blurted out avowals of love to the girl with whom Jim now realized he himself had fallen madly in love. Such a feeling was madness, he told himself, especially as he had never laid eyes on her until less than twelve hours before.

"Come on, Jim," Hank called in boyish disgust, "I've risked yore life and mine just to hear that señorita mock at my feelin's like that!"

Hank flung open a door and rushed through a room. Jim followed. But there was no escape through the grilled window. Too many men were in the patio beneath, and others were arriving from the peon quarters across the way. They were swarming into the house, too. Jim heard some rushing up the back stairs. He plucked Hank's arm, and together they raced back that way on tiptoe. Rita had disappeared. The Claypools surprised four men nearing the head of the back stairs. Both Americans flashed guns up onto them.

"Into this room, *andale!*" Jim snapped.

He rushed the four men into a room. Then he forced two of them to jerk off their clothes. The turmoil increased throughout the house, but no more men had yet ventured to the second floor. They were organizing for a rush, however. The cowboys had to hurry.

"Put on that man's clothes, Hank," Jim called to his brother.

Then he handed each stripped Mexican a blanket and drove the pair out into the hall. Glad to be out of the enemy clutches, the two blanketed men rushed headlong down the stairs. Of course they spread the

word that the Americans were fixing to don their clothes and slip out in disguise. That information in itself created greater confusion among the peons for the dreaded enemy would be harder to recognize, might even mingle with them in escaping.

The moment the door closed behind the pair, though, Jim stopped Hank from donning the Mexican garb. Waiting barely long enough for the news to pass around about the disguise clothing, Jim forced the two remaining captives to hurry out onto the balcony and jump off. Naturally every man in the yard thought that these two Mexicans were the Americans.

A great outcry went up. Men rushed to that side of the house. They swarmed upon their luckless comrades and beat them into insensibility before they discovered the trick. In the meantime, Jim and Hank sped across the hall, into another room. From this they rushed to still another, before they found a door opening onto a tiny balcony. Not a single lantern or torch remained within effective range. The cowboys dropped to the ground and made a break for the stone fence. They were rolling over this before a fresh cry told that their escape had been discovered. The Claypools had a start, though, and they made for the peon quarters, where they were sure to find horses tied.

"Over this way, to the majordomo's *casa,*" Hank called.

In front of the majordomo's house were several mounts. None was of promising build, however, and all had the hard, huge-horned saddles of Mexico. That made little difference, though. What those two cowboys wanted right then was transportation. They went clattering away, while women and boys squawked frenziedly to the men who were now rushing in that direction.

"I wonder how Judge Martinez likes this?" Hank said to Jim, as they pounded along. "He made out my case to Rita lots worse than it really was, because he didn't want me to take her from 'im, the dirty snake. I hate to be run off now and leave her to him."

Jim said nothing in reply. They galloped a little farther. Then Hank twisted about in his saddle and shouted, "I'll be back, Martinez, and yuh can't take my gal from me while I'm gone, neither!"

Jim knew that this taunt was the boyish Hank's way of telling Rita Logan herself that he was coming back to see her. Hank's ardent recklessness only added weight to the dull thing that had settled in Jim's breast.

They headed their horses for the northwest entrance to the valley. This meant miles over rolling country, then hours of hard mountain climbing. Only trails ran through the two mountain passes to the valley. Nothing had ever been brought into God's Patio except by pack train. Hank knew the northwest trail well enough to keep to it and stay out of reach of the posse that came stringing out after them. Jim thought they might throw the pursuers off in the darkness.

"No use," Hank told him. "They'll have a Tarahumare Indian or two out in the lead, and afoot. Them ornery scamps will hear every hoofbeat of our plugs, and keep the posse informed on any direction we take."

"The eastern pass will be watched too close for us to get out that way," Jim reminded him.

"This northwest pass is our best bet," Hank agreed. "And let's streak it out of here, before that rebel gang blocks that pass. I can't let the rebs get me now. Even they'd hang me for a traitor. You see, I really had given up the rebel cause to take sides with Rita Logan, after I fell for her. But Boots wouldn't believe that I'd changed over to her side, thanks to that Martinez cuss. I had a Mexican rebel with me before Rita had me arrested, and he told me he was goin' back to report me a traitor when I told 'im I was chuckin' the rebel game."

"Yo're better off out of that revolution," Jim declared.

"Mebbeso," Hank regretted. "But I hate to have old Billy Braxton think I turned yellow on him or anythin'. Billy is my pard and a real one. He's still with the rebels, a *capitán.*"

CHAPTER V

Moonlight Mercy

WHEN Rita heard Hank's challenging call float back, she stopped still amidst the confusion about her. That message sent a queer feeling of dissatisfaction through her. The very audacity of that Hank Claypool in calling her "my gal!" He was coming back. That was worse still. She had felt some relief at his escape, but now she knew she wanted to hang him if she caught him again. And the queer part of it was that at this moment she hardly thought of his traitorous action as her reason for punishing him.

Adolfo Martinez came running up to her. "Never worry," he assured her, in agitated voice, "they will not live to get far. They got poor horses, and we have a corral full of good ones."

"*You* better mount two corrals full of horses to get that pair!" she said bitingly.

Rita herself could not have told why she made such a sarcastic reply to Adolfo's assurance. He was quick to feel the thrust.

"Ah, Rita, *mi carida,*" he complained, "I make sure get those *Americanos* only for your sake. Eef no, those two *Americanos* weel help tak' thees beautiful valley from you, and then call you greaser gal. But they mus' walk across dead body of Diego Adolfo Juan Martinez y Madero! That ees how Adolfo theenk of you, Rita *mia!*"

He seized her hand and attempted to plant a kiss upon it. Rita drew the hand back, and turned away, but she was moved by the look of pain that flashed into Adolfo's eyes. After all, he had never given her the least cause to reject his ardent wooing.

"Perhaps those *Americanos* even tak' love of my sweetheart," he warned with passionate earnestness, "and then laugh at her foolish leetle heart. Anyway, *adios,* teel two *Americanos* be dead!"

"Send me my Chico, *pronto!*" Rita called after him.

"Yes, so glad have you weeth me," Adolfo replied.

In a moment a dark-skinned lad came running up with Chico, a trim-legged young palomino horse. Chico was only a "cold-blooded" animal, but his fire and life would carry a rider farther than any thoroughbred could ever take him. Rita was pleased to see that her saddle had been retrieved from her morning's adventure, and was now on Chico. It was a beautiful thing of hand-tooled leather and engraved silver. Springing to it, she sent the horse flying off in the direction the Claypools had gone.

Adolfo shouted after her to wait for the band of riders that he was throwing together. But Rita was afraid that the two Americans would outride such an unwieldy band of men in the night. The words of Martinez had made her fear the two cowboys more than ever. Take her valley? And her love? Never would they get either!

"One is a smiling, smooth-tongued young traitor," she vowed to herself, giving Chico free rein, "and the other—he is nothing but a gringo outlaw!"

It required a great deal of hatred for the girl to use that word gringo. She loved "the States," as her father always had referred to his country, and she had spent considerable time with his people north of the Border. But that did not imply that she must love everybody who came from the States, she told herself with a strange inward turmoil—especially not traitors and outlaws.

Far ahead she could hear the hoofbeats of two horses that kept bearing toward Barranca Grande. In this section, barranca means something more than a mere canyon. It is a deep, rock-walled trough that winds down from the mountains. If the two men once got into the narrow confines of Barranca Grande, she could not possibly ride around them and block their flight. She knew that the Americans might try to treat her lightly when she confronted them and challenged their flight. But Jim Claypool could brush her aside only once. This time, she would know how to deal with the bold *caballero* from the north. Not only must his brother be brought back for legal execution, but Jim himself must

answer for his daring raid on the *hacienda*.

With such a decision, she urged Chico up a rough little creek that meant considerable shortening of the main trail. This gained her ground, but still the hard-riding Americans were in the lead. However, there were other near cuts, and Rita was ahead when she pulled the puffing Chico up under the shadows of the great shoulder of rock that seemed to stand guard at the lower end of Barranca Grande. She could hear the pair coming.

Leaving Chico tied back from the trail, she took her stand behind a big rock not six feet from where the men must pass. The full moon was just striking the top of the rock, so they would be able to see her well when she arose, gun in hand, as she intended to do.

Thinking themselves safe now, the brothers were letting their horses take a little more time. Rita could hear their words. Hank was laughing in his carefree way. But the approach to the barranca entrance made him serious.

"Well, they'll have a hard time cuttin' us off now," he declared. "But yuh know, Jim, somehow I'm not so durn glad to get out. I'm loco over that girl, I tell yuh. Wouldn't you be, if yuh was in my place?"

Rita almost stopped breathing to catch the older cowboy's reply. It proved to be commonplace enough, when Jim replied, "She's a lovely little critter, Hank. But don't lose yore head over her too much." Rita suddenly grew angry at herself. Did she really care what that deep-voiced cowboy said about her? Here, she would show him right now.

They were within twenty paces of her rock. She pulled up the .38 Spanish-make automatic pistol which she had secured at the *hacienda* to take the place of her .38 six-shooter which Jim Claypool still had. Her hand gripped the weapon until its muzzle trembled. She slackened the grip, and found the palm of her hand sweaty. The Claypools were almost opposite her. Jim rode behind. He was still standing between Hank and danger.

His big Stetson was shoved back a little, letting the moonlight fall full on his rough-hewn face. Rita could even make out the scar that had been put there when he had gone into battle for the younger brother. But the girl was struck by the look on his face. It was a troubled, baffled look, and he seemed older than he had this morning.

Now they were both opposite her. She gripped the gun and thumbed the safety off. But that was all she did. While she hesitated, Hank's horse blew noisily through its nostrils and shied off from her rock a little. The cowboy muttered something about its smelling a bear or cougar. But Jim Claypool's hand moved deftly to his hip. It remained there, while he rode past the rock, his eyes boring into the shadows below the top. Only Rita's eyes showed over a lower corner, and she had a branch shielding her head.

"I would only make a mess of it," Rita excused herself after they had gone on, "with the horse shying and making that cowboy look squarely my way."

But she knew, the next moment, that this was an excuse and nothing more. She had had the drop on them and had not used it, even before the horse shied. The vision of Jim's troubled face haunted her.

"Rita, you little bow-legged burro's baby," she scolded herself, "don't let anybody else know that you were goose enough to have those cowboys under your gun and then let them get away."

She decided to wait until the posse had gone by, which would not be long. Adolfo Martinez was bent on making good his vow to rid the valley forever of the Claypools. There he came, fanning the wind, with two or three dozen men hard on his heels. Rita thought that she had better go to Chico, to keep him from whinneying to the other horses.

But the horse was moving out toward the trail. Then she saw that the animal was being led by Motaka, a Tarahumare Indian. Rita had never liked Motaka, and he seemed to know it. The Indian had been a furtive henchman of Martinez for two years. Rita realized it would be of no use to take the horse away from him or to forbid him to tell Martinez anything of what he may have seen.

"Thank you, Motaka," she therefore greeted him brightly, "for getting my horse

ready. Did you see that horse of theirs keep me from holding up the *Americanos?"*

Motaka made no reply. In a moment Martinez was pulling up beside her.

"Did they go through here?" he asked hastily.

"Yes, and I was within six feet of them; but one of their horses shied to give me away."

The Tarahumare was looking intently at her. A look of reproof was on his nearly black face.

"Ugh, plenty chance," he declared.

Martinez seized upon Motaka's hint. "You surely didn't let them slip by purposely?" he asked her incredulously, in Spanish. "That would mean the brazen young one did have good cause to call you his sweetheart. It would mean, also, that every soul in God's Patio would call *you* traitor!"

That was a stinging thrust. Martinez was just crafty enough to aim it at the most vulnerable spot of the girl's nature, her love for the Patio and its loyal people. She could see the men's faces now, lighted with zeal for defending their homeland. Every eye was on her, each still trusting her implicitly.

"Me traitor to these boys?" she echoed, taking them in with a sweep of her small hand. "I'd die first!"

"We know it, señorita," murmured José Montoya, whose wrinkled, pockmarked face suggested all the patience and philosophy of a happy race. "No Rito would ever do less for El Patio de Dios."

He referred to the house of Rito, the girl's maternal ancestors. To the *paisanos* of this valley, the Rito family always had been little less than saints. They looked to the Rito line for everything from house and home to spiritual and political guidance. At this moment, Rita Logan was the last of the house of Rito. She bore its name, in feminine form, in her Christian name. In everything else she was to the peons the embodiment of all that the house of Rito had meant to the present and past generations.

"Forgive me, Rita *mía,"* Martinez hastened to beg in repentant Spanish. "I was too hasty. Of course you are loyal. Let us be on after that pair of gringos, so you can prove where you stand."

Rita was trapped by the man's cunning change of front. There was no excuse now for her to refuse to accompany the pursuing force on up the mountainous trail. Already Martinez was galloping ahead, calling some gallant encouragement to the peon force to follow him in the name of El Patio de Dios. Rita fell into line.

As she rode, she had a vague feeling that Adolfo Martinez was bidding for the favor of the peons in his own right. Did that mean that he was making a double bid for power in the valley? For months now he had been her ardent suitor, and he had hinted at his qualifications to succeed to the feudal power wielded by her old uncle, Don Felipe Rito, and then by her own father.

Twice up the long, hard climb they got within hearing of the Americans' horses ahead. The cowboys seemed content with only a short lead. They were sparing their mounts for the still more strenuous miles beyond. Rita wondered if they would actually join the rebels from the Sonora side and come back to lead the assault upon her little kingdom. She admitted to herself that she could not blame them if they did. Jim had offered to fight for her in return for Hank's release. She had refused him flatly. If he joined up with the Gardina guerrillas, which Hank already had represented, it would be her own fault. But she hated to think of fighting Jim Claypool.

"He's got that terrible something about him," she analyzed mentally, "that throws all fear to the winds in a fight, and it will make other men do the same to follow him. Yes, I'm afraid of that *vaquero!"*

Martinez dropped back to her side frequently, and each time he had something to add about the treachery of the Americans ahead. His talk and her own inner fears made her more than ever determined to capture the Claypools before they joined the Gardina army.

But determination alone could not overtake the pair who knew so well how to

ride the trail that climbed long, snake-back ridges and wound around precipitous mountainsides. The dark hour before the dawn found them entering the pass. Soon they were pushing out to where holes had been drilled into the solid granite wall and heavy iron bars inserted to support the pole framework of a trail. The gorge dropped off to dizzy depths below, and the granite climbed still higher above.

Suddenly, from ahead, there came the sharp crack of a rifle. Then others added their ominous barks. The blunter pop of sixguns followed. Rita thought that the two Americans had encountered her pass guards, and were fighting their way through them. That brought her lips tight together. Now that it had come to a showdown between her people and the cowboys, her heart was for the *paisanos* who were ready to give their lives for their cause. But she hated to think of a single man falling in such a strife.

"Hear them?" Martinez cried. "That ees *Americano* answer to Mexican girl kindness. They keel plenty our men, *mi carida.* Death to the gringos!"

"Yes, get them!" Rita sanctioned.

CHAPTER VI

Trail Trap

JIM CLAYPOOL at first thought that they had run into the pass guards. But when one of many whining bullets raked across his left shoulder, numbing it momentarily, and another cut his horse down in the trail, he knew that such night shooting was not being done by untrained peons. Hank likewise was quick to guess the identity of the force there in the trail ahead of them. The rebels had captured the pass guards.

"It's the rebel outfit," he shouted to Jim. "It's terrible, Jim!"

Jim at first did not understand Hank's dismay. They both hugged down against the side of the rock wall on the upper side of the trail. Jim got busy with his six-shooter, for the enemy in front was moving toward them under cover of a barrage of bullets. But Hank was not trying to help him hold the rebels back. Instead, he started climbing slowly up the rugged rock wall, where there was hardly enough of a rock shoulder to shelter him from the flying lead. Jim went sick at heart. He thought that Hank was showing a yellow streak.

"Hank, pour it into 'em!" he shouted. "They'll get us soon enough."

"No, Jim, I can't shoot into 'em," Hank called back. "My pard is amongst them boys, and I can't take a chance on killin' Billy."

The enemy ceased firing momentarily, and from their ranks there came the harsh, angry shout: "I'm out to get you, yuh dirty traitor." Evidently the rebels had guessed the identity of at least one of the pair.

"That's Billy," Hank told Jim remorsefully. "He's a fire-eater, Billy Braxton is. And he really takes this rebel war serious. But he just don't understand how I got tangled up, that's all."

There was just enough moonlight streaming over the rim of the mountains for Jim to see dark objects moving toward him on the trail fifty yards away. But that was sufficient for him to get in some deadly work with his six-shooter. He checked the advance momentarily, mainly because only a comparatively few of the men could get into position to fire on the narrow trail, at the same time. But every time Jim's Colt blazed, the yellow spurts of flame made his head and hands a target for the enemy guns.

Jim knew, also, that the pursuers behind him would be along any moment. They could guide their course by his blazing guns, while working in behind him. He realized that Martinez would try to dispose of him first, before beginning to fight the rebel advance. If Jim got caught between two hostile forces, there would be no hope for him. For that reason, he gave up trying to reply to their guns, and began climbing up after Hank. He had little hope of escaping permanently this way, for there seemed no likelihood of their scaling the rugged walls. But they might get out of the way and let the two main enemy forces clash in a battle for the pass.

But to his consternation, the men under

Martinez opened fire from behind him sooner than he expected. And the rebels seemed to know that he and Hank were climbing the wall, although the shadows prevented their spotting them for positive aim. Bullets began to spatter against the rock far too close for comfort, though. Jim had to fight.

Crouching back in a shallow depression in the rock wall, he turned a Colt onto the rebel force. That only drew the rebel pattern of fire more closely around him. They were moving up nearer, too. It would be only a matter of moments until they would be able to pick him off. Jim thought that his time was mighty limited. Hank saw this.

"Billy," he shouted to his partner in the Gardina band, during a lull in the shooting, "for the last time, I'm warnin' yuh to let me and my brother out or I'm throwin' in to fight yuh."

"Suits me," Billy Braxton bellowed back.

Hank had to make his choice between firing on a beloved partner or seeing that partner help shoot his brother down in a fight against terrible odds. The blood bond was too strong. Hank threw in with Jim, and together their weapons spat angry blazes at the rebel force. The peons from the Patio got into action, too, to help rake the trail with lead. But the rebels held their ground stubbornly. Jim realized that daylight soon would be upon them. He and Hank would not last long after it became light enough for the rebels to see them.

With the battle still waxing hot below, he left the firing to the two major enemies and began climbing again. In a moment he and Hank found themselves up against a seemingly impassable surface of rock wall. But they had to go on, no matter if a slip did mean hurtling hundreds of feet downward. A shelf of rock, no more than eight inches wide, offered nothing but finger grips on its outer edges.

"Jim," said Hank, "if I don't make it, I want yuh to get word to Boots that—"

"Hank," Jim broke in, "I'd ruther yuh wouldn't say that."

"Why? You nutty over her too?"

For a moment Jim made no reply. He caught his fingers on the ledge of rock and let his weight down until he was swinging against the wall. Then he paused.

"Yeah, Hank, I reckon I am," he said. "But don't worry, I'll never try to horn in on yuh."

Then he went creeping around the perilous ledge, hand over hand, with his body dangling against the cliff. Hank came close after him. Jim thought he would never find a place where he could catch his toes and rest his aching fingers.

"Jim," Hank called, with terror in his voice. "I can't make it; my grip's clean gone!"

Jim was only two or three feet ahead of his brother. Although his own grip seemed ready to break any moment, he thrust out a foot and caught it under Hank's bootsole.

"Come on," he encouraged. "I'm makin' it fine."

The slight weight that he took off Hank's fingers gave the younger brother new heart. Jim kept his foot under Hank's, although he feared any second that the added burden would tear his own numbing fingers loose. More and more slowly he moved his hands from one new hold to the other. Then his foot struck a little jutting hump of rock. He caught his left foot onto it, and let Hank rest his right foot on top of his secure boot. In a moment they were pulling themselves across to a sloping ledge that had enough earth on it to support a scrub cedar. Both men fell down on it, to rest arms that seemed nothing but heavy pieces of lifeless weight.

The ledge widened a trifle a few yards farther on. This spot had been selected for a trail lookout, because it could be reached from the trail below by means of an inconspicuous rock fault which sloped downward in the direction opposite from that by which the cowboys had come. This fault had to be supplemented the last dozen feet by a notched pole for a ladder.

Cowering behind the scrub cedar at the head of this pole was Rita Logan. She had been on the point of throwing a rope to the Claypools when they gained the ledge in safety, having heard the uncanny

Tarahumare, Motaka, tell Martinez that the Americans were escaping up the rock wall. While Martinez hastened to give orders for the battle during his absence, Rita had begun the climb at once.

She had arrived on the ledge in time to hear that strange conversation between the two brothers, as they clung there with death figuratively grappling its bony arms about their legs. Now that they were safe, she would not have them know for the world that she had heard that low, passionate confession come from Jim Claypool's lips. Those brief words passing between the brothers had set her heart to pounding in a wild, tumultuous fury. She trembled from head to foot at the violence of the thing that had surged through her breast like the stab of a knife blade. She must get away without their knowing that she had heard.

Her best chance would seem to be to steal back down the pole ladder while the Claypools lay there in exhaustion from their climb. But just as she started for the ladder, the black, square-crowned hat of Martinez showed over the ledge. He was coming with more caution than haste. Rita knew if he saw her he would speak to her and thus betray her presence to the Americans. She pulled back behind the cedar again, her heart still beating tempestuously.

The next moment, though, she realized that she had acted from an unreasoning fear rather than judgment. She should have stopped Martinez some way, no matter what the cost. But now it was too late. He had his gun on the cowboys, who had not been looking for anybody up this high. Rita was only then aware of the fact that it was light enough for better sight at close range.

"So, *mi amigos,*" Martinez began tauntingly to the Americans, "I have pleasure for see you *vaqueros* one more time—alive."

That last word was an open avowal of the man's intent to kill them. Through the cedar boughs, Rita saw a queer, helpless look on the faces of the two men. Jim tried to move his gun hand, but it was still too numb to make it obey except clumsily. However, this was movement enough to make Martinez pull the trigger on him. She could not blame him too much, either, for she herself had told Adolfo to get the Americans. The girl had to throw aside all her own embarrassment in order to stop Adolfo's deadly pull on the trigger.

"Stop it!" she fairly screamed, flinging herself out at Martinez.

The valley judge jumped nervously and, in so doing, pulled the trigger upon which he was already pressing. However, he shifted his aim sufficiently to miss Jim by inches. At the same time, the shot directed the attention of the rebels to the ledge. They could not see onto it very well, but they began *whamming* bullets up against the rocks so that the four persons so strangely assembled there were forced to lie flat on the scant earth. Martinez again directed a cocked Colt onto the cowboys before they could help themselves.

"Face the other way and fight that rebel gang," he ordered.

Jim looked at Rita. "That what yuh want me to do?" he asked, not at all disturbed by the threatening gun muzzle of Martinez.

"We'll all have to fight them for a time," Rita replied. "Adolfo, you go back to the trail and look after the defense there."

"If I leave you up here weeth *Americanos,*" he answered defiantly, "our people all weel know you favor gringos!"

Rita had to meet that challenge then and there. She had overheard enough to know that Hank really had turned to her side before she had him arrested. She was going to need the fighting Americans sorely if she were to cope with this invasion.

"Those two gringos," she pronounced measuredly to Martinez, "are going to make every man in El Patio de Dios glad that I do favor them. They're going to fight for me, voluntarily, and not because you've ordered them to do so at the point of a gun."

"Now yo're talkin', Boots," Hank exclaimed joyously. "Jim, let's limber up and then unravel a stream o' lead at that reb outfit!"

Without a word, Jim twisted about and thrust his Colt muzzle down over the ledge rim. While Martinez made his sul-

len retreat, Rita crawled up between the two cowboys. She put her own gun to work, too, experiencing a strange thrill at lying there shoulder to shoulder with the two brothers, fighting the stubborn invaders below. One of the American's guns counted as well as a dozen in the hands of *paisanos*. Rita was proud of the fact that her father and her grandfather had come of this same cowboy breed that feared nothing except to be in the wrong.

"Rita, get back out of range!" Hank cried. "I can't stand to have yuh risk yore life up here."

Jim gave her a sidewise glance between two barks of his six-shooter. Rita expected to have him second Hank's order. But she proceeded, nevertheless, to see what was the matter with her automatic, which had jammed.

"Let 'er fight," Jim amazed her by saying.

Rita thrilled anew to that invitation. He was accepting her as a comrade in arms, instead of relegating her to the lot of a helpless woman. She gave him a grateful look and began again on the automatic. Jim reached over, seized the weapon and hurled it out over the precipice.

"That cheap Spanish thing will get yuh killed," he told her. "Take this old reliable."

He handed her the Smith & Wesson which he had taken from her the day before. Together the trio began the battle in earnest from their superior position. The lighter it grew, the more deadly the fire they poured down on the rebel line that lay along the narrow trail under what scant cover there was to be found—which soon began to tell on the morale of the Gardina soldiers. Within less than half an hour, they were retreating backward to safer range.

The rejoicing of the temporary victors was short, however. Farther back, the soldiers began trying to climb the rock walls that towered over the trail. Rita watched this a moment, then turned to Jim and Hank.

"It may take them a long time," she prophesied, "but that sort of thing will give them the upper hand sooner or later. They're too many for us to keep them from getting to the heights in big numbers, I'm afraid. Then they'll have us."

"If there's any way they can get to the top and come in on us," Jim replied, "Hank and I will get there first, and hold 'em. Look, they've left a dozen dead down there now."

"But look over here, too," Rita lamented.

She pointed down to her own forces. Three or four peons lay dead; twice that number were wounded. That devastation among her own people wrung the girl's heart.

"Poor fellows, they'd fight until the last one was dead," she bemoaned, "but they're no match at all for trained soldiers. That's the price we pay for being peaceful these two centuries. We've got to round up our cattle and get out with what we can. With all livestock gone, perhaps the army can't stay so long."

Jim gave her a withering look. "You of all people losin' yore nerve?" he chided coldly.

"I know what you're thinking," she retorted, "but I can't help it. I won't drive these poor men to such a futile slaughter. It would be useless, for that rebel army will get in sooner or later, anyway."

"But the Federals might come along any time to help us," Jim reminded.

"They've got their hands full down in country where they can move an army," she countered. "The only question up to you, Mr. Claypool, is whether or not you want to help me and my men get out with our cattle."

At that sharp rebuke, Jim gave up the argument. Saner judgment told him that she was right. The untrained peons, many of whom had never used a rifle, could not hold the army back for long, even with all the advantage of position and food supply. Nevertheless, it went against his nature to give up the fight before it was hardly begun.

"All right," he agreed, "I'm ready to take orders."

"Me too," Hank put in.

She led the way down to the trail. All firing had ceased for the time being, and

now Martinez came up to her, with brow unpleasantly knitted.

"Adolfo," she commanded him, motioning to Hank, "it is time for you to suspend your sentence of death on this man. We need him."

"All right, the sentence ees suspended," Martinez said obediently, though with none too good a grace.

"And he will stay here in charge of the pass defense," Rita announced. "Hold them back two days, if possible."

"What?" Martinez exclaimed. "The men, they weel not fight for heem one meenute."

"No?" she asked coldly. "Let's see."

She called the able-bodied men nearer, and explained the situation in terse words of authority. Black eyes rolled at Hank while she talked. Admiration shone on the men's faces when she reminded them that it was the two deadly guns of the Americans that had done most to turn back the invasion for the time being.

"I was wrong about the Claypool boys," she finished in native tongue, "and now they will show us. Hombres, *Viva* Hank Claypool! *Viva* Jaime Claypool! *Viva* Mexico!"

The men joined with her in the tribute. Only Adolfo Martinez refused to add his voice to the salutation.

"And you," Rita said to Jim, "will be in charge of rounding up the cattle and getting them out. That's the biggest job. Don't bother with rimrockers or *ladinos* in the bad brush. Grab only what you can get together in three days. The majordomo can see to hiding all grain and tools in the mountain caves or to burying them. I myself will attend to getting the women and children out. We'll leave only an empty shell for the rebels."

The girl gave the orders with the composure and thoroughness of a calm field general. But tears seemed ready to swim in her eyes, and her low voice was laden with suppressed emotion.

"But where on earth are you going with the cattle and the women and children?" Martinez demanded in displeased Spanish.

"I'm going to get our people to some town in Chihuahua where they can be cared for till this is over. As for the cattle, I hope either to sell them to the Federal army or to cross them into New Mexico. They won't be safe from rebel plunder this side of the Line."

Jim turned to Hank and asked, "Think yuh could hold this pass four days instead of two? Yuh can tear up the trail where it hangs out on the support work, and give all efforts to keepin' the rebs from climbin' up to the top some place."

"I can hold 'em till hell freezes over, if necessary," Hank declared. "But how about that east pass? Gardina's main column is liable to push up for it any day."

"I'm sending Judge Martinez to see about that," Rita answered. "They may cut us off. We'll just have to take a chance on that."

"And," Hank declared, with a glance at Jim that was not as playful as he tried to make it, "I'm afraid I'm takin' a awful chance in lettin' yuh out of my sight for four days, Boots."

CHAPTER VII

Vow Fetters

FOR the next two days Jim Claypool worked like a demon. Rita's father had made many of the younger Mexicans into splendid cowboys who worked cattle after the American fashion. Leaving the less skilled riders to the flat, open country, Jim took a score of hard-riding *vaqueros* into the hills, where the cattle were thickest. There they rode like men of iron, from the first crack of day until it was too dark to see a cow ahead of them. Each small cluster of cattle was whooped down into a "hold-up," and the hold-up in turn was pushed on to the circle bunching ground. From here older riders shoved the gathered stock on for the *parada,* or main herd, on Pie de Paso Creek.

Rita came to camp the first night. She was riding as hard as any man in order to prepare the panic-stricken inhabitants for flight and at the same time to check up on all phases of the evacuation. She seemed very anxious about the news that

Martinez would bring concerning the rebels that had been reported on their way to Paso Alto. If she and her people could get by this column of soldiers, there seemed little to prevent their reaching the American Border with the herd.

Jim talked business frankly with his unusual boss. But when that was over, he made an excuse to get himself out of her presence.

"Got to go caution that nighthawk," he told her, "about havin' the *remuda* down earlier in the mornin'. We're forkin' leather before daylight, come *mañana.*"

"Send Juan or Magdaleno to tell the nighthawk," Rita requested. "I want to speak to you alone for a moment, Jim."

That was the first time she had addressed him by his given name. It sent a queer pounding through his breast. He had tried to avoid her as much as possible, because he was remembering his promise to Hank not to "horn in" on his love affair. He felt the obligation keenly while Hank was up there in the pass, risking his life hourly, no doubt, to stay the enemy force until they could get out. And he felt the need of aloofness far more than ever, as he looked at the beautiful girl standing there in the glow of the campfire.

There was a queer, wistful look in her dark eyes tonight, something that puzzled him at an hour when every man, woman and child should have had no thought except successful flight. She started strolling off from the firelight. He made no move to follow.

"Coming?" she asked, looking back at him in disappointment.

"Yes'm," he answered, driving his laggard feet after her.

The belated moon was not up yet. She led him on through the pine and tamarac until not even a flicker of light from the campfire followed them. When she halted, he could feel the nearness of her dazzling beauty.

"It's about Hank," she began hesitatingly. "He's so young, and I don't want him to go on feeling as he does and—and—"

"Oh, Hank isn't a kid any more," he broke into her faltering words. "Do yuh think I'd leave 'im up there bossin' the pass defense if I thought he couldn't handle himself any place?"

A moment of tense silence ensued. It seemed as though she were groping for a better expression of something that troubled her. Jim's hands started clutching out for her. But all at once he jammed them down to his sides as though they were steam-driven arms of machinery. He was forgetting, here in the madness of her presence.

"Hank's a great kid," he blurted out with a ruthlessness entirely unknown to the true Jim Claypool. "Hank's not like me, killer and bully, and—and—tricky devil, in everythin' from burnt brands to —to women!"

He whirled about and went striding back toward the fire. She came running after him, one hand missing its clutch for his arm.

"Jim, that's not like you!" she remonstrated. "Wait a minute, will you?"

Again Jim felt his firm resolution fading away. He must make it impossible for himself to break it, and it must be done now. She had not been fooled by his ruthlessness. Well, he would be brutal.

"Just like I thought," he hurled back at her. "Yo're tryin' to play both of us up, mebbe only to order us finally shot, as our rewards. Not me, sister! I'm wise to yore kind of little fawnin', *señorita.*"

He expected to have her fly at him with a storm of withering denunciation for such an utterly false charge. But not a word came from the wounded girl. He glanced back over his shoulder again, and saw her standing in the faint glow of firelight, as though his harsh accusation had frozen her into a block of ice.

He hated himself viciously for the cruel thing he had done. But it was that or break the vow he had made to Hank while they hung on the very brink of death. He had been Hank's keeper for all these years. He would wind up the job without betraying his brother in the one big thing of Hank's young life. He therefore clumped on back to the fire, sat down and began to fill his corncob pipe with a calmness wholly

at odds with the strife in his heart.

Rita stood in her tracks for several minutes. At first, Jim's brutal accusation had struck her heart with a paralyzing pang. Then she began to feel that his words were too utterly untrue to be believed even by one as hard as he claimed to be. But their sting lasted. It racked her being with an angry, primitive impulse to seize a stick and fly at him with it. Nevertheless, she had to fight that down. To her people, she was the representative of two hundred years of as fine culture and tradition as Mexico had ever fostered. She must not give way to madcap anger before her *vaqueros.* But she could rid herself of Jim Claypool, even though his mere departure would be small consolation for the hurt he had given her.

As she went back to the fire, he was taking a guitar from one of the *vaqueros.* With all the rush and excitement, little Pablo Gomez had to have his *musica* along. Rita had encouraged him in it, because music helped break the terrible tension that hung over everybody. As if to prove how lightly he regarded the whole matter, Jim was running his fingers over the strings of the guitar. Then, when he must have seen her firm steps bearing toward him, he broke into a happy Mexican melody about a bandit *caballero* riding south from the Rio Grande, with the hearts of black-eyed señoritas his chief loot. Rita was surprised at the rich mellowness in his baritone voice. She stopped squarely in front of him.

"We can do without you and your music," she said to him in English, so that very few of the men understood. "Get out, and start tonight."

She pointed an imperious finger northward, as if she would indicate that he not stop this side of the American Border. He stilled the guitar strings with his hand and glanced up at her with a mocking look in his eyes. He said nothing, though, until the look of mockery changed swiftly to one of concern.

Then he answered, "Okeh! But in goin', I'd like to say that I think yuh better start some of the cattle for the east pass in the mornin'. Six thousand or more will be too many to string out on that mountain trail at once."

"And every word you say here is too many, too," she shot back at him. "I said to go, and never mind advice to me!"

"On second thought," he answered her boldly, "I think I'll stay and see that my advice is carried out. We understand each other now, and yuh can't afford to run off hands when they're needed like they are here. That is, unless yuh want to let personal matters outweigh the cause of all these people that look to yuh for everythin' in the world."

She hated him for putting the case that way. Yet she knew he spoke the truth. To her, the ownership of the little valley was a trust in behalf of all the faithful toilers who helped to create its wealth. She owed it to the Patio people to salvage everything she could before the inrush of soldiers. She was still their queen, and a queen must not quarrel with subordinates when the fate of her kingdom might depend on the added strength of one man's help.

"All right, cowboy," she answered his avowal, "stay right on with us, and welcome. Let's have some more music."

Rita forced herself to laugh, in order that she might make the disagreement seem only a playful joke to the two or three *vaqueros* who understood enough English to get the drift of the animated conversation. Jim seemed to understand her reason for the laugh, and joined with her. Then he struck off into a gayer rendition of the same song.

The tired riders applauded roundly at the end of the melody. They were learning to like this *Americano* who rode hell-bent-for-leather all day and then sang their native songs to them in the glimmer of the firelight. Jim strummed off into another tune, and this time it was a foolish little air about a cockroach that had run short on *marijuana.* He was midway a third song, *Suavecita,* or *Nice and Easy,* when Hank pulled up a sweating horse by the camp-fire.

"Has the Gardina force broken through?" Rita asked in panicky haste.

"Nope, we're still holdin' the gap,"

Hank answered, after the fashion of a bold *caballero*. "I'm here because I just got hungry for another look at yuh, and I'll be back up at the pass by daylight. That is, if yuh'll let me have a fresh horse—and a nice stroll in the moonlight."

The moon was just peeping over the jagged mountain top. In Hank's request, Rita saw her chance of vengeance on Jim Claypool. She gave him a glance half of defiance and half of triumph.

"Ah, Señor Hank," she smiled demurely at the younger brother, "custom says that a Mexican maid should retreat behind her grilled window at an hour like this. But tonight is next to my last in God's Patio, and—you have come far, *caballero!*"

She took hold of the pleased Hank's arm and glided away with him. She was American cowgirl enough to defy the old Spanish custom that she had mentioned; but she had rather the air of defying Jim himself to stop her. He had accused her of playing at the game of love. Very well, she would give him far better grounds for his accusation.

That rebellious resolution lasted only until, further along, Hank began in his boyish way to tell her what she meant to him. Rita saw that he was in deadly earnest. She was too genuine and sincere in her make-up to trifle with the youthful cowboy's heart even for a moment, no matter if her revenge on Jim were robbed of some of its sweetness. But she was beginning to like the impetuous Hank, in spite of his faults. It therefore was with some regret that she turned back toward her horse sooner than she would have liked, so far as Jim Claypool was concerned. Hank followed, his adoration undimmed by her lack of response to it.

The music by the campfire had stopped. Jim was coming toward them, as if he had something important to say before she set off for her home again. Nobody else was in sight. All at once Rita was overcome by a perverse caprice. Tilting up her face, she planted a hasty kiss on the amazed Hank's lips. Then, before he could wake up and realize that he was still on earth, she swung around and ran off as if in flight from a major crime.

CHAPTER VIII

Kiss Rustler

THE next morning, Jim had the camp astir two hours before daylight. It was still dark when he began dropping riders off on circle, far up on the ridges and mesas. Before sun-up, he was back in camp, starting a dozen men off with what cattle they had gathered. He had to press into service less competent cowboys, for every man was needed. But now he began driving them, and kept it up until some were ready to fall from the saddle with weariness and lack of sleep. All day cattle poured into the bunching ground. Twice more he started new riders along the trail to the eastern pass with additional bunches of the vast herd.

Late that afternoon, Adolfo Martinez came into camp while Jim was making a change of horses. Martinez had just returned from his lengthy trip out through the eastern gateway, Paso Alto.

"Good news," he greeted Jim. "Federal army ees on Rio Lobo. General Oñate say he want buy all cattle eef deleever before he mus' march for meet Gardina army. Need much cattle for feed beeg Federal armies all over Chihuahua. Thees very much better than reesk long drive for Border."

Selling the cattle out at one lucky sweep! It was true that this would be much better than trying to rush them to the Border, when they might be beset by rebel bands and Yaqui Indians who fought both Federals and rebels at their pleasure. When the time came to re-enter the Patio, Rita could restock her range with the money this herd would bring, and perhaps with better stuff.

"Go find Señorita Logan," Jim told a young Mexican, "and tell her that we can sell—"

"No time for hunt her," Martinez cut in. "General Oñate say he send agent for meet Patio boss at forks Rio Lobo and Blanco Arroya. Mus' be there at ten tonight, or agent wait no longer."

"Ten tonight?" Jim echoed. "A person hardly has time to make it there by ten tonight, even if he started right now."

Martinez shrugged his shoulders. "I ride awful hard to get here," he stated rather disappointedly. "But General Oñate ees soon march to fight Gardina on La Mesa del Agua. He wait no longer."

"But," Jim pointed out, "I've got no authority to sell the cattle. We must find Señorita Logan."

"Bueno," Martinez consented, with the air of resignation to bad business.

Jim called several riders and dispatched them in as many directions, with word to bring the señorita hurrying there. He had to wait at the central point instead of going out on some trail himself, for fear that he might miss her. As the time slipped by without her showing up, he knew that it was going to be a ride indeed to meet the Federal buyer by ten o'clock. For the ordeal, he picked a big iron-gray horse of stocky symmetry.

Still the time dragged by without the girl's showing up. Now it would take a superhuman effort to reach the designated spot by ten that night. Jim despaired of ever doing it. All the while, he kept ordering the tired *vaqueros* back for more cattle as they came in. He also gave detailed orders for their carrying on while he was gone.

Then Rita came galloping up. She called to him to get going with her for the pass, saying they could talk as they rode. Jim fell in beside her. Martinez galloped along with them until he explained that he already had made such a hard ride that he could not stand the return trip with them.

"Don't forget," he called after them, as he fell behind, "that Federals are on Rio Lobo and rebels on La Mesa del Agua."

Afterwards Jim remembered very plainly that careful distinction. The rebels on La Mesa del Agua—Water Mesa—and the Federals on Rio Lobo. Just now he was thinking too much of Rita to look below the surface of what Martinez said.

"Yo're in no shape to make this ride, either," he told Rita, looking at her weary young face.

The girl was going on sheer nerve alone, he could see. The strain of the past few days had been too much on her. She had been in the saddle eighteen and twenty hours out of each twenty-four, she admitted. What she did not admit was that she had not slept a wink the last night after she had gotten home. But she would not hear to turning back. She was going to make it there by ten that night, to keep the appointment.

"Better give me authority to make the deal, and name yore price," he told her. "Then I'll shove on and pick yuh up later."

"You can make the deal if I give out," she answered. "I'll take a chance on trailing the herd to the Border, though, before I'll take less than thirty-five *pesos* a head all around. Let's whip up. We can get fresh horses along the trail, from the cowboys with the advance bunches of cows."

For a time, she actually set the pace of that gruelling ride. Jim needed to have a picked horse to keep up with her. They made two changes of mounts on the upward climb, and still Rita led. He could see that she was holding onto the saddle horn to keep her seat, but the coming of night made it impossible for her to stay awake. He caught her sound asleep when they were pulling out into the high eastern pass. Stopping her horse, he shook her gently. She came to with a quick start and a low exclamation.

Soon they had passed her guard outpost by which Jim had raced a few days before. Then she fell asleep again, right when they were winding in and out on the narrow trail that hung over an abyss two thousand feet deep. Jim feared to wake her, lest by some mischance she pull her horse over. He took down his rope and built a loop which he carried in readiness for any emergency. But she kept her balance until they were on a wider stretch. Then he shook her again and pulled her from the saddle, saying:

"Yo're turnin' in for sleep on the ground, right here."

But she did not hear. A limp little arm fell across his shoulder and she emitted a child-like moan. Utter exhaustion made her hard to awaken. He stood there with her in his arms a moment, her arm now half clutching his neck and her head resting against his shoulder. It was a madden-

ing moment. Jim never knew until then that he had in him the makings of a thief. His lips were bending toward hers; he would take only one!

But he suddenly jerked his head back like a soldier snapping to attention. This was stealing, pure and simple, and stealing what belonged to Hank. He had seen her give his brother a kiss only last night.

He might have kept that good resolution, had her arm not tightened about his neck ever so slightly, as though in her sleep she sought security from some dream danger. Again Jim's lips bent toward hers, and this time not even the screaming protest of his conscience could stop that cowboy from the rustling of that kiss.

For a few brief seconds he was lost in the mad joy of the fierce embrace. Then he came back to life with a jolt. The girl's arm was gripping his neck. Was she awakening?

"Jim!" she murmured, with the very breath of heaven in her low voice.

Jim Claypool could not have been more shocked into stern realities if he had been caught rustling cattle. He flung her from his arms and sprang to his saddle. He did not think that she had been fully awake when the kiss ended. He sent his horse plunging off around the mountain trail with more breakneck abandon than when he had raced past the guards back there days before. He heard her calling after him; evidently she had awakened. But he rushed on. He did stop to call back to her, though, saying,

"I put you down for a nap, Miss Rita. That's all yuh need. I'll meet yuh back on this trail after I put the deal through."

Jim's mind was in too great a state of chaos for him to make more detailed arrangements than that for finding her upon his return. He was glad to see that her horse trailed its bridle reins after him until the darkness made it impossible to see its dark form. She would not be able to follow him on it immediately, anyway.

Alone in the sobering coolness of the night, he began to upbraid himself for his crazed act. The only consolation that he found at all was the hope that she was not awake sufficiently to remember. If she did remember and told Hank, his brother would never forgive him. Hank was as jealous as he was impetuous.

With such miserable thoughts for company, Jim pushed down toward the forks of Rio Lobo and Blanco Arroyo. Ten o'clock came and still he was not there. But he spurred on, hoping that the agent of the Federal general would wait a short time, at least. It was not far from eleven o'clock when he drew rein at the forks of the two streams. Through the moonlight, now beginning to fall athwart the pines and cottonwoods, he saw a man sitting on a white horse across the smaller stream. Jim splashed across the creek to him, but the tall, proud man made no effort to meet him.

"Are you General Oñate's agent?" Jim asked.

"Yes, but where Señorita Logan?" the man demanded sternly.

"She couldn't make it," Jim replied, willing to overlook the agent's gruffness for the sake of the girl's cause. "She gave me authority to make the deal."

"You too late talk beesness," the agent asserted haughtily. "General Oñate's orders say come back camp *pronto.*"

Jim still was willing to overlook the agent's overbearing attitude, for Rita's sake. He could not fail her just to set this hombre in his place.

"It won't take long to make the deal," he informed the man. "What flat price per head can yuh offer for everythin' that can walk, on about six thousand cattle?"

"Forty *pesos,* no more."

"Make it fifty."

"No, forty."

"All right, it's a trade, if the pay comes in gold."

"Sure, here ees five thousand *pesos* for guarantee."

To Jim's surprise, the agent handed him a small bag of gold. He counted it. The man proffered him a receipt to sign. Jim signed it, and asked, "Where do yuh want 'em delivered?"

"On La Mesa del Agua, eight miles up from here."

"But Martinez said the rebels were on that mesa."

"He say eet wrong. Rebels on Rio Lobo."

At this moment Jim recalled that Martinez had repeated his statement that the Federals were on Rio Lobo. Could Martinez have some underhanded design in misleading him about the location of the two armies? He would watch that. Jim, however, was anxious to get back and make sure that Rita was all right, then hasten on and get the herd to moving this way.

He waved the agent a casual farewell and got going. His horse, though, was too worn to be crowded on the return trip to the pass. After a time, it became so exhausted that Jim turned it loose, and started to walk. But his feet had not recovered fully from the blisters of a few days before, and now they soon began to punish him anew. There was no great urge for speed, however, and he slowed down more with every mile. Daylight found him still climbing.

It was not yet quite daylight when a Mexican suddenly stepped out in front of him with a double-barreled shotgun leveled on him. Two more men came from behind trees above him, with rifles pointing in his direction.

"*Arriba los manos!*" the first one growled.

Jim had to raise his hands as ordered. One man took his guns, then fell back to cover him again. The man with the shotgun came up and began searching him. First, he saw the bulge in Jim's shirt where he carried the gold which the agent had paid him. After taking that, though, he kept up the search until he found Jim's own gold in his money belt, whereupon all three men became elated at sight of so much yellow coin.

But one of them let his enthusiasm die when, all at once, he seemed to remember something, and he turned to look toward the sinkhole made by the uprooting of a tree. The others sobered when they joined the man and Jim in looking that way. There, with pleased face watching calmly over the bank, was Adolfo Martinez. He got up with easy assurance and stalked out. The man with the gold handed it to him without a word. So Martinez was behind this hold-up.

"Tie him up," Martinez ordered the three men. "Kill him if he makes the least show of fight."

Jim did not need to understand Spanish to know that he was in a mighty tough spot. Martinez would not show himself thus, Jim reasoned, if he had any intention of ever letting the cowboy return to Rita Logan. He stood back now with his own automatic on Jim while two of the men bound the American's hands behind his back. Then he drove the captive ahead of him, while they went around the mountainside. Soon they were on a game trail that showed signs of recent use by man.

Jim felt sure that this was meant for his death march. He resolved to take the first chance he got to make his escape, however desperate. But Martinez was watching him too closely. Then, when the judge halted beneath some giant spruce trees a mile from the trail, Jim thought that his time had come.

"You very white een face," Martinez taunted him. "You have good right be white, *mi amigo*. For now you lose one very sweet girl, and go for be hung in New Mexico."

For a moment Jim hardly understood what the man meant by the latter statement. The Mexican was speaking in English with a freedom that indicated he knew his three hirelings could not understand that language.

"But," he went on, "Señorita Logan mus' sell cows. I be easy on you. For pay me, you mus' write letter wheech say she deleever cows wherever General Oñate's agent tell you."

Jim at once thought of the erroneous information that Martinez had given about the camping places of the two armies. But the man's present order to write the letter seemed prompted by a genuine desire to inform Rita where she was to make delivery of the herd. Martinez would not want her to lose anything, since it was manifest that he still hoped to come into possession of both the Patio queen and all her vast domain.

Jim had good cause to mistrust Mar-

tinez, but he could see no harm in complying with this seemingly natural request of writing the girl what he would have told her verbally if he could have seen her. Perhaps Martinez had gotten the place mixed in his mind because he was worn and tired, like the cowboy himself. Jim therefore took the pencil and sheet of paper which Martinez handed him, and wrote the message to Rita to deliver the cows on La Mesa del Agua.

He did not like the satisfied gleam in Martinez' dark eyes as he took the note and scanned it approvingly. Then the Mexican told him that he meant simply to take him northward and turn him over to the New Mexico authorities. Jim still had to answer to the sheriff of Hidalgo County for the Lordsburg shooting affair when Hank had mixed it with some cowboys over a girl.

Apparently, Martinez thought that Jim would be hanged for his part in the fight that had cost two of Hank's enemies their lives. But Jim felt positive that a trial would result in no more than a penitentiary term at the worst. For Hank's rival for the girl had provoked the fight, and they had been four to one against Hank until Jim had rushed to his brother's aid.

"All right, men," Martinez instructed his henchmen, "take him along. And be very careful not to let him out of your hands until the American officers on the Border put their handcuffs on his wrists."

"All I'm askin' of yuh," Jim said to Martinez, "is to turn Miss Rita's gold over to her and tell her I was on my way to her with it when I got turned around for the Border."

"I take care that," Martinez promised him. "You have plenty other theengs for worry about."

Martinez stood watching while his men took the captive on out of sight. Then he nodded his satisfied head and smiled grimly to himself. "Indeed you do have plenty to worry about, Claypool. If I had killed you, Rita would pine away for you. But now—ah, now, señor, she hate you like a snake!"

With that morsel of thought, Martinez proceeded a little further around the mountainside. In a rough little gulch he stopped and gave forth the low call of an owl. No answer came. Martinez waited. Presently, he heard a similar call down below, and answered it. It was Garcia, the man who had met Jim as the Federal agent.

"He never had the least suspicion but what I was a genuine Federal agent," Garcia reported in good Spanish to his superior. "You should have seen me acting haughty and impatient. That was what fooled him so well!"

"You got his signed receipt for the cash?" Martinez asked.

"Yes, señor."

"Keep it, but do not show it to anybody unless I make a play that calls for it to be produced, *sabe?*"

"But aren't we through with Jim Claypool, except to put him over the Border?"

"No. I told my men to let him escape. After this, the more he does around here the more Señorita Logan will hate him—until he is dead!"

CHAPTER IX

Border Bound

DAYLIGHT awakened Rita where she had slept since midnight, up on a sheltered rock ledge just above the spot held by the pass guards. Somehow, she had gone to sleep with the feeling that Jim would take care of her interests as well as she herself could. That same sense of trust in Jim still was with her while she washed in water which a peon poured sparingly from an *olla*. She cherished it further as she vanquished a ravenous appetite with fresh steak, *tortillas, panoche* syrup and black coffee made Mexican fashion from coffee essence. Even when Jim did not show up long after he was due, no doubt of his honesty of purpose arose in her mind. Then came Martinez. He greeted her with ardent words, not forgetting to assume an air of ownership of her and her cause.

"Where ees Claypool?" he asked, strongly accenting the last syllable.

"I'm worried about him," she admitted.

"Only now?" Martinez bantered, arching his thick black brows wisely.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," the judge began, as if most unwillingly, "Motaka very smart Tarahumare. He see when we sleep. He tell me thees *Americano* start north after tak down payment from Federal agent for cows."

"Maybe he's scouting out a way to take the herd through safely," Rita ventured.

"Mebbeso," Martinez shrugged, with a manner that condemned Jim more than words could do.

Martinez was crafty enough to say no more just then, but his manner made Rita demand to know his reasons for mistrusting the American, as he plainly did. Not until then did Martinez produce the letter which he had compelled Jim to write to her.

"Motaka say Claypool leave thees letter on rock een trail," he lied outright. "Please read. I theenk gringo tell you he gone for good."

Rita was scanning the letter with anxious eyes. "Why, no," she denied, "he only says to deliver the cattle to the Federals on Le Mesa del Agua."

"That ees wrong," Martinez snapped back. "Federals camp on Rio Lobo. I know thees. Claypool make some bad trap here. Hees brother once fight for Gardina. Mebbeso, Jeem Claypool want let all beeg herd fall een rebel hands."

"No, he wouldn't do that," Rita vowed warmly.

But within her own breast the cunning Martinez had set a grave doubt to tormenting her. Adolfo had said at the outset that the Federals were on Rio Lobo. Why should Jim tell her to deliver her herd on La Mesa del Agua? Her torment grew more intense as she waited another half hour without hearing anything further from Jim. Then she decided she must go find out more with her own eyes. She could not stand this awful uncertainty.

Martinez volunteered to go with her. They were well around the trail when shouts from behind brought them to a halt. A friendly Tarahumare runner came swinging around to them. He had crossed canyons and intervening ridges that no horse could traverse. He held up a slip of paper. It was from Hank Claypool, and said:

> "Dear Boots: Rebels getting big force on top northwest pass. Will have to give up the pass at daylight. But I'll never give you up.
>
> Hank, the Loco Boy."

Rita had looked for such news hourly. Now that it had come, though, she was frightened at its terrible import. At last the spoilers were going to pour in. Her paradise valley was gone. Gone, too, was the song that had begun to strum on her heartstrings. She felt that she would be needed down in the Patio, to help lead out the caravan of Patio people following in the wake of the herd. Already, they were on their way.

On the other hand, if treachery lay ahead, she herself wanted to find it. Martinez could carry out her orders for the escaping caravan. But she herself wanted to deal with Jim Claypool, if she should find him guilty of treason to her cause.

"Adolfo," she told Martinez, "you hurry down and keep the herd and the people moving hard for this pass. It will take the rebels till mid-afternoon to get down onto the valley floor, with Hank holding them all he can. You throw together a few hundred head of cattle, and drive them toward the *hacienda*. That will take the rebel army that way for a few hours anyway, until they discover the trick. I'll try to get some Federal troops to guard the rear of the herd."

Martinez gave his genuine approval of her swiftly formed plans. He still had a vital interest in seeing the Patio herd kept out of the hands of the revolutionary forces. Rita took two of her guards with her and set out on the trail of Jim Claypool.

Down near the foot of the mountain she met a messenger from General Oñate. The man was bringing to the terrified valley word that the rebel band on the Chihuahua side had been turned back by the timely arrival of the Federals. The rebel leader, Gardina, would not risk trying to put his ragged little band through the pass, when a Federal army of eight hundred men threatened to strike him from behind any hour.

"And where have the Federals been camped the past two days?" Rita asked.

"On Rio Lobo."

"Have they not—not been on La Mesa del Agua—not at all?"

"No, señorita, the rebels are there."

Rita could not drive back the sickening feeling that crept upon her as she had to accept the terrible conclusion that Adolfo had been right. Jim had betrayed her and her people!

She hurried on to the Federal troops. General Oñate already had broken camp, taking up pursuit of the rebel column. Rita did not overtake the rear guard until after midday. The general hurried back to greet her, for even those high in power in Mexico paid homage to this girl, last of the Ritos. Rita could hardly wait until she could bring up the subject of the buying agent and the deal for the cattle.

"There is something wrong here," the general told her. "I did send an agent to buy a few cattle from you. But he has not come back to report, strangely enough. And it is preposterous that I authorized the purchase of your whole herd, or wanted them delivered on La Mesa del Agua. It is just a Gardina trick to get your herd."

Rita stared off toward the north. Some place up that way Jim Claypool must be riding. His treachery seemed complete. If this was General Gardina's trick, then Claypool was his trusted agent. Why had she been such a fool not to see this before? His brother had been a Gardina spy; why wouldn't Jim be too? But there seemed nothing that she could do about it. He was gone, and trying to find him up through the rough country that prevailed the first half of the way to the Border would be like looking for a mustard seed on the Mojave.

"I advise you to get your cattle on across the Border," the fatherly general was saying to her. "They will be safe no place on this side until this revolution is put down. The Rito family has always stood by the government. Therefore, Gardina will confiscate your entire possessions if he whips us, even temporarily."

Rita got his consent to send back a score of *rurales* to protect the rear of her herd and exile train from the rebels who now were swooping down into the Patio from the Sonora side. She left ahead of the soldiers, however, again accompanied by only her two men. As she rode toward the Patio, a deep, dull pain gripped harder at her heart.

She had gone several miles when a shout from an opposite ridge brought her to a halt. Far across, a lone rider was waving at her while he hurried his horse toward her. Jim Claypool!

"He must think," she said to herself, while she waited for him to come up, "that I don't know about his trickery yet. And that suits me just now." Aloud she said to her two men, "Throw your guns on that man when I say the word 'Claypool.'"

"I'm powerful glad to run onto yuh so soon, Rita," Jim began, hurrying up. "I've been captured. They were goin' to take me back to New Mexico. But I got away, and I can't see yet how they got so careless as to let me do it."

"You're just too good for them," Rita smiled.

He looked at her closely, as though he had the slightest suspicion of irony beneath her smiling words.

"Did yuh get my note about where to deliver the cattle?"

"To La Mesa del Agua?"

"Yes, but I'm not so sure the Federals will be there now. Seems to be a lot of soldierin' goin' on around here right now."

"And a lot of funny work too," she smiled, leaning toward him in alluring coquettishness. "For instance, the precious way that you rescued me from my saddle slumber, up on the trail the other night, Mr. Claypool."

Jim's face went red as a beet. He looked as though his chief desire was to sink into the earth. While such confusion overwhelmed him, the two men jerked their rifles up to cover him, and Rita herself whipped out her gun to give him a nice muzzle view. Jim sat motionless, as though he were wondering how a man could dream like this in a waking moment.

Rita herself felt more like running away from this terrible task than going through with it. She knew that, for time of war,

she had enough charges against this man to have him shot before another day passed. Yet the very thought of dealing out such a fate to him made her grow weak. Such a traitor deserved any penalty, she tried to tell herself. But, now that she had him under her gun, she knew that she did not want to be the one to turn him over to General Oñate and name her charges; that would be virtually pronouncing his death sentence. She therefore seized upon the hope of escape offered her through his words of a moment before.

"Been captured, then allowed to escape so easy you can't believe it!" she scoffed witheringly at his story. "Gringo, Mexico won't dirty its hands by shooting you. So I'm taking you back to the Border and turning you over to the Hidalgo County sheriff who must still want you for murder over there!"

"Rita," Jim began, his voice husky, "there's somethin' all wrong in this. I've told yuh the absolute truth. All I ask is a chance to prove it."

"It's been proved already," she flared back. "Don't make me hate you still more with further lies!"

"But, listen, wo—"

"Shut up, before I order you shot!" she cried.

Jim looked into the fiery flames of her eyes and realized that she was too enraged to listen to anything he might offer in his own behalf just then. He saw, too, that she might be goaded easily into sending him to the same fate that Mexico often deals out to its own traitors—the firing squad.

"All right, I'll shut up," he acceded, "but not till I promise yuh I'll come back some day, even if it's after I serve twenty years in the New Mexico penitentiary. And I'll come to prove to yuh that I've been framed some way—"

"One more word from you," she cut in with new rage, "and I'll take you back to General Oñate for immediate sentence to death!"

Jim took her at her word. She saw that the men bound his hands with green rawhide, and then strapped his feet beneath his horse. With him amply secured, she led the way over to a little creek bottom where a few Tarahumare Indians lived in miserable little split-log huts. A stocky, dark-skinned old man came out to smile his welcome. For years he had been the watchdog for this pass. Rita pointed to Jim.

"Keep him four sleeps," she said.

"Four sleeps," repeated the Indian.

That was all the orders she gave before riding off without wasting another glance at him. Jim soon found out that the order was as good as an hour's instructions. During the ensuing three days the Tarahumare and his comrades never once let up their vigilance.

On the third morning, a breeze from the mountain brought the far-off bawl of cattle. The Patio herd was moving down on this side. Once into less rugged country, it could move faster. The trail passed within a mile or two of Jim. But nobody came by for him, until after the herd drags had passed on out of hearing hours later.

Then Rita came back. She had half a dozen men with her, and a pack horse well burdened. By the ample number of guards, Jim guessed that either the need for men to fight the rebels had lessened or that Rita had taken new resolve not to let him escape his fate in New Mexico.

After giving the men her brief instructions, she dispensed to the Tarahumares the beef, corn and *panoche* on the pack horse. Then she rode north alone, leaving to her men the responsibility of bringing him along after the trail herd, as though it were a disagreeable task of ordinary routine. That night he was kept at a short distance from the main camp. Rita stayed away from him entirely. The women and children were no longer with the drive, which began to make good time in the more open country. Jim gathered from scattered talk that the women and children had been branched off on a trail to Carretas, close into the Sierra Madre, so that either the trail drivers or the Federal army would be between them and the Gardina band at all times.

For several days Jim was kept at the rear of the long procession that wound northward. Soldiers rode before them and

on their right flank. Then General Oñate withdrew this detachment because he was marching east in pursuit of the wily Gardina, who, to all appearances, had given up the idea of seizing the big herd. Another day passed, putting them up within fifteen or twenty miles of the Border, where the New Mexico "jog" in the southwest corner extends south to include most of the Playas Valley. Across here every revolution sends many thousands of cattle scuttling to the safety of the American side.

During all this trek, Jim had got no further chance to argue his cause, with Rita or anybody else. Not even Martinez had come near him, except to make certain occasionally that Jim was being kept amply secure. Most of the time Martinez had been too busy staying near the young Queen of God's Patio, or making himself important elsewhere along the string of cattle.

Long before this, Jim had become convinced that Martinez had set the trap which had made him out a traitor to Rita's cause. As for Hank, Jim did not know what had become of him. The younger brother had not shown up at all since that night Jim had seen Rita plant the impulsive kiss on his lips. Memory of that moment made Jim think that Hank, at least would not fare badly at the hands of this strong-willed young woman—that is, if Hank escaped further treachery at the hands of Martinez. The arch-plotter, however, would be anxious to get rid of Hank if the brother showed any promise of coming between the judge and his double ambition of getting possession of Rita and her paradise valley.

The day before this, Jim had seen Rita dispatch two well mounted riders to the northward. Now he was not surprised to have her come back and announce to him:

"I've decided to ride on ahead with you and turn you over without further delay. I've sent a messenger on ahead to have the Hidalgo County sheriff meet us at the Line."

"Why such a hurry?" Jim asked. "I'm not sufferin' as it is."

Rita did not answer. But she seemed tormented by some unnatural urge for haste. Jim wondered later if she had had a woman's intuition of the new danger that was moving toward them. But at the moment he thought Martinez probably was responsible for the rush to land him in jail before Hank could come to his rescue on this side of the Line.

Just then Martinez came riding up. Rita called off the names of four men and told Martinez to bring them to her as guards for the prisoner. Martinez gave Jim a triumphant look before departing on the errand.

Now was Jim's chance to make his last plea for a fair hearing, if ever. He was to be herded off to an American jail and thus be snatched out of the thick of this strange entanglement. Somehow, he could not feel that it was all over. And that look from Martinez made him wonder if Hank, too, were not in grave peril. Martinez seemed too well pleased about something.

CHAPTER X

Rescue Debt

ADOLFO MARTINEZ had his own notions about obeying Rita's order to let Hank alone. He knew that the impetuous Hank would show up just as soon as he could get a horse and overtake the drive. For that reason, Martinez had left Motaka behind, with orders to find the younger Claypool and put a bullet through him.

Martinez was due for a fine surprise a few hours after Rita set out for the Border with Jim. The judge had already assumed more authority than Rita had actually bestowed upon him. He was ordering the *vaqueros* to bunch the herd up near the foot of a high hill, when he saw a strange procession moving toward him. It was Hank, riding boldly into camp. He had a rope running back from his saddle horn, and the other end of the rope was around the neck of Motaka! The Tarahumare Indian looked as though he had been led a good many miles that way. And he obviously showed his fear of his captor.

"Here's the polecat yuh sent out to drill me," Hank began to Martinez. "The next time yuh take a notion to kill me, Martinez,

yuh better do it Mex fashion and knife me in the back."

"I no send heem out to keel—"

"Yes, yuh did," Hank snapped. "The black skunk has told me everythin' he knows, includin' how Rita let me and Jim pass her on the trail the other night after the ruckus at the *hacienda.*"

On the face of Martinez there was a mingling of fear and craftiness. But, as Hank talked, like a boy, the crafty look grew and the fear subsided. Martinez was shrewd enough to read a youngster like Hank, and to shape his plans accordingly.

"Ah, the señorita only wait for good time," he smiled, as if in amused indulgence at Hank's ignorance. "Where Señorita now? I tell you. She gone for *Americano* Border. Take you brother, for geeve heem over to sheriff. Mebbeso, sheriff hang you brother and thank my sweet Rita."

Hank's face went pale at that information. But he mistrusted Martinez.

"That's just a lie," he declared, "to trick me into somethin' else. I know Rita wouldn't do a thing like that, after all Jim's done for her."

"Go ask any thees men," Martinez invited.

Hank did ask several men separately. All told him the same story. But they did not tell him that Rita was driven to the act by the belief that Jim had tried to betray her outfit into the hands of the rebels. Hank had come here to warn Rita of a wily move of the rebels. He had surprised two rebel scouts at a water hole and forced from them the information that Gardina had faked a retreat, but now was cutting back to seize the coveted herd. Now however, Martinez' words sealed his lips.

"What's the big idea for treatin' Jim that way?" he demanded of the Mexican.

Now Martinez had maneuvered this inexperienced young hot-head into the very corner where he wanted him. He assumed a regretful, sympathetic air.

"Well, boy," he began, "I tell you truth. Rita no longer want be bother weeth fool cowboy. He try mak too much love for her."

"Make love to her?" Hank echoed.

"Sure, I theenk that what *Americanos* call eet when man talk sweet theengs all time, then try kees and hug gals. Rita, she no like that—not weeth you brother. But she like very much weeth me, for she marry me *muy pronto.*"

Martinez grinned in a most satisfied fashion, and puffed contentedly at his brown cigarette. But he was watching the cowboy through the smoke haze about his veiled eyes. Hank had gone a pasty color. His voice trembled when he said:

"So that's the way Señorita Logan pays back two gringos for riskin' their fool hides for her, huh?"

"Oh, she appreciate, all right," Martinez consoled him. "But, after all, she ees Mexican girl, and she like Mexican hosband."

Hank had learned to hate Martinez whole-heartedly. But now his hate blazed up so fiercely that he longed to plant a bullet squarely between the smiling scoundrel's eyes. For fear that he would yield to the temptation, he turned his horse and hurried off.

So Rita was marrying herself a Mexican husband, was she? And Jim had made such desperate love to her that she was willing to send him to the pen just to get rid of him? And that after Jim had given him a sacred promise not to horn in between him and Rita. Such bitter reflections drove the hot-blooded Hank into a blinding rage. Jealousy gnawed deep at his heart from two angles, one represented by Martinez and the other by Jim. All at once Hank hated everybody in the world. As he saw it, Rita was false to him and to Jim. Jim was false to him. Martinez was false to everybody but Señor Martinez. All right, he would show them what a square-shooting man thought of such double-dealing. Before this was over they would drink bitter from their own brew. And Mr. Jim would find out what it meant to double-cross a brother and a pard!

With jealous fire raging wildly in his heart, Hank headed for the Border. He took a straight course for Dog Springs, a watering place a mile or two on the American side. He had no difficulty in crossing the Line south of Dog Springs, for this

vast stretch of Border has no town all the way from Columbus to Douglass, and consequently has few Line-riders.

But Hank found that Rita had not been at Dog Springs. He cut back toward the Line from there, and from a low hill discovered riders moving along White Water Creek, which came out of the Sierra Madre Mountains. Riding nearer, Hank learned that the Hidalgo County sheriff had managed to get his touring car down to the Line, over the fairly flat floor of Playas Valley. On the Mexican side were gathered fully a dozen men. Hank guessed correctly enough that they were *rurales* and *fiscales* chiefly, Mexican Border guards and emigration officials who had heard of the approach of the vast herd.

Rita was not among them. Hank saw that Jim had already been transferred to the Hidalgo sheriff. But a deputy raised the hood of the car and began tinkering, as though they had engine trouble. Hank took a chance on that giving him some time.

He eased back out of sight, recrossed into Mexico and left his sorrel hidden in a dry wash several hundred yards west and south of the official group on the Line. Then he came back into New Mexico and circled around to the old road, little more than a trail, where the sheriff's car tracks showed. Already he could hear the motor on the move.

But just as Hank was getting in behind a bushy yucca to give the sheriff a fine surprise, he spied a Line-rider moving toward him from the east. That was a bad break. But Hank guessed the man probably had got wind of the coming herd, as had the Mexican officials. The officer was afoot, indicating that he must have left his horse some place near, to stalk Hank.

The young cowboy did not stop behind the yucca, but walked on down the road casually. That did not fool the Line-rider, however, who called on Hank to halt. Hank pretended not to hear and kept going. The Line-rider shouted his second command. Hank answered it by breaking into a run down the road. He had heard the sheriff's car coming. He was taking a desperate chance on stopping it and freeing Jim, with sheriff, deputy and Line-rider all to deal with.

The officer started running after him. Just then the sheriff's car came over the crest of a little sharp rise of ground. The top was down, and the sheriff sat with Jim, in the back seat, while the deputy was alone up front. The Line-rider shouted a warning to them and opened fire on Hank, who was down in the far ditch of the old road. He hunched forward to lessen the target his body made for the officer.

Bullets flew past him, but the Line-rider was on the run as he fired, and a hundred yards away. Hank had no regard for bullets now, anyway. He was going into this wild mix-up with the reckless abandon of a man who courts death. The deputy was bringing the car to a quick halt, dust swooping up from its sliding wheels. The fighting sheriff hauled out a gun and dropped down low in the car as it stopped, half turned across the road.

Whereupon, Jim promptly jerked up his manacled hands and crashed them down over the sheriff's head with astonishing swiftness. The deputy leaped out, apparently to threaten Hank from over the hood and hold him back until the Line-rider could get nearer. But Hank was stopping at no man's threat, or even his bullets. He charged right on for the car, firing so close over the hood that the deputy did not even stick his head above it.

"Throw out that gun," he yelled at the deputy, "or I'll blow yuh full o' holes!"

The deputy was none too courageous, and this fight had come up so utterly unexpected that his nerve failed him. He poked his hands above the hood, shouting, "Don't shoot me; the sheriff's out and I give up!"

Jim did have the sheriff helpless. That blow on the head had knocked the man senseless.

"Get in that car," Hank snapped at the deputy, "and head back for the Line."

The Line-rider had ceased firing, evidently fearing to hit one of the county officers. But he was closing in with plenty of nerve. Hank sprang to the running board on the far side of the car and tried

to cut a bullet close enough to stop him. But the ball must have struck a stone and ricocheted into the man's leg. His left leg went from under him, and he fell. Sight of the Line-rider going down made the deputy more willing than ever to obey Hank's commands. In spite of his shaking hands, he got the car turned back for the Border.

The officer began firing from where he lay, but in a moment the car sped out of range.

Meanwhile Hank had gotten into the car, taken the sheriff's handcuff key from his vest pocket and turned Jim loose. The older Claypool remained on the seat beside the sheriff, just as formerly, except that he had the sheriff's gun in his hand instead of the irons on his wrists. Leaving Jim to do the necessary guard duty, Hank got down out of sight in the car as well as he could. The shooting had attracted the attention of the dozen Mexicans, who were almost back to their temporary camp some three hundred yards on their side. They gazed back in uneasy puzzlement as the car neared the Line again.

"Put 'er straight across, and stop for nobody," Jim called up to the unwilling chauffeur. "Now, step on it!"

The car bounded across the Line at breakneck speed over the old trail. The Mexican officials shouted and waved angry hands. Then they grabbed for their guns. Hank told the driver to keep the car nosed to the south, even when bullets began to kick up dust before and behind them. Two struck the car, but did not halt its progress.

Then some of the Mexicans went running for a big automobile which Hank heretofore had not noticed, parked behind some trees. It came out later that they had the car in this remote spot only because they had confiscated it a few days before for an alleged illegal entry, a common practice across the Line at times.

When Hank's car got over the first hump of ground, he told the deputy to cut west. They jolted along over a roadless ground that grew rougher with every yard, until up near a rocky, steep hill, they came to Hank's horse.

"We get out here," Hank told Jim. To the Hidalgo officers he said, "You fellers hit for the Line up there, *pronto*."

The two men lost no time obeying that order.

Jim got out, buckling on the sheriff's gun. Evidently he expected two horses would be waiting here, but there was only one.

"We both can't go far on the one cayuse," he said, puzzled.

"Only one man is going to ride away," Hank told him.

CHAPTER XI

Trail Forks

FOR the first time, Jim noticed the strange look on his brother's face. Hank's eyes were boring into him with savage intensity, as he motioned recklessly back toward the Mexicans.

"They'll be on us in no time," he said. "Throw yore gun, Jim! I've just snatched yuh out of the law's hands, first so I wouldn't be under any obligations to yuh; second because I wanted to kill yuh myself!"

"Hank, what on earth is wrong?" Jim asked, horrified at his brother's earnestness.

"Yuh promised not to horn in on me and Rita," Hank accused hotly, "and then went right ahead double-crossin' me. Yore fresh lovemakin' turned her against both of us, and Martinez grabs off the prize."

"But, Hank, I nev—"

"Don't lie; just shoot! Look, there's the car comin', full of Spicks. Quick, I'm goin' for hardware!"

Hank started his hand for the gun on his hip. Jim knew he could beat Hank to the draw, if he chose to make a fight of it. But that meant killing his own brother. He tried to stall for time, to let the Mexicans come up. He preferred recapture to shooting his brother.

"I've got a strange gun," he cried to Hank. "Yuh know it would be unfair for me to have to fight with it."

"It's a Frontier model, exactly like what yo're used to," Hank retorted, barely halting his hand. "And I said to grab for it, too, hombre!"

Hank's hand made the fatal break. Instead of sending his own deadly right hand into action, though, Jim raised both hands and started walking toward Hank. The younger man flashed his gun up toward Jim's heart, and Jim stopped for a few seconds.

"Aren't yuh quite coward enough to pull?" he taunted.

Jim hoped in some way to shock his brother into realization of what a rash thing it would be for two brothers to go into a gun duel over a girl whom neither could ever hope to win.

"Who's the coward?" Hank shot back. "I've offered you an even break, and yuh won't fight."

"No, because yo're my brother, kid. What would old Bill Claypool say if one of his boys rode back home and told 'im he'd shot the other?"

That question sank home to Hank. His staunch-hearted old father was little less than a god to him. Hank cast a glance at the scar on Jim's cheek. Jim had got that fighting for him, and had become an outlaw in the States for it.

"I've been plumb crazy, Jim," Hank suddenly blurted out. "Why, I was meanin' to kill yuh! No woman's worth that."

"Yeah," Jim contradicted again, "she is worth it, if it ever could be necessary for her sake. But it's not. Gimme that paw, kid."

Jim stuck out his hand. Hank seized it gladly. For a few seconds they stood thus, hands gripped like iron, while the pursuit car was stalled momentarily in the sand of a shallow dry wash.

"Yo're wrong still about Rita bein' worth a killin', Jim," Hank reasserted. "She's marryin' that Mex, Martinez. And she tried to throw yuh in the pen, after the way yuh've fought for her the last week!"

"I've been afraid of it," Jim said hoarsely. "Hank, answer me straight: Did Rita turn yuh down?"

"Yeah, flat, three different times. I'm through with her forever. How many times did she turn you down?"

"None. I never gave her the chance. But I aim to the next time I see her, seein' that yo're turnin' yore cards over."

"Go ahead, make a fool of yoreself," Hank invited, in bitter voice. "But now we got to beat it, or fight it out with those Spicks comin' there. Take the car and I'll ride beside yuh for a spell, while I tell yuh somethin' more."

Jim sprang into the auto and sent it bumping along over the almost impassable ground, while Hank galloped beside him.

"Martinez is marryin' Rita," he informed Jim, "because he wants her *dinero*. There's where we can get the laugh on him. The revolutionary forces already have the Patio, and now Gardina is about ready to grab her herd."

"Gardina?"

"Yeah. That old fox let on like he was runnin' east. But when he caught the Federals asleep, he cuts back sudden for a spot where he knows the cows must pass."

Jim was silent, while he dodged a prairie dog colony. Hank swung back by the bumping car.

"Let's me and you clean away from all this and take a long trail out," he proposed.

"Hank," Jim called across to him, "instead of that, I'm goin' to help Rita save her herd."

"Save it for Martinez as a weddin' gift, I reckon!" Hank scoffed.

"No, just for Rita. Get in this gas buggy and let's swing around the Mex car, then go together."

"Nope, Jim, and surely yuh won't be fool enough to go fight with Rita's bunch this time. The rebels will be a dozen to one of the men guardin' her cattle. Yo're too late anyway. Gardina's army is probably capturin' the herd this minute."

Jim merely shook his head. Hank jerked out his gun, sped up close to the right of the car and fired twice. The bullets punctured both right tires. The car swerved into a pile of rocks without overturning. Hank put two bullets through the gas tank, then galloped on.

"Yuh can make it to the mountain easy," he called back. "But yuh can't make it to Rita's outfit in time to fight against my side."

"Hank," Jim shouted after him, "I still

aim to help Rita put her stuff across the Border."

Hank let that end the talk, and galloped away. Jim had scrambled out of the car, and now he broke into a run for the foot of the high hill. After going only some two hundred yards, he reached ground so rocky that the pursuing car was brought to a halt. The men scrambled out and came running after him.

"Hope my durn feet hold out this time," Jim said to himself as he settled down to a run for the steeper part of the hillside.

Two of the pursuers seemed more fleet of foot than Jim liked. They forged ahead of the others, and began to gain on the cowboy. Not far up on the hillside was a jutting shoulder of rock from which one man might hold several at bay for quite a while. Jim pointed to it.

"Don't try to get me when I reach that rock," he shouted at the two nearest men, in their own tongue.

He raced easily for his destination until he dipped down into a little saddle in the ridge. Then he put all the reserve strength he had into his legs. But, instead of continuing on to the rock, he cut down over into a little arroyo, which had a dry wash barely deep enough to screen him. Under this cover he turned back for the car which the Mexicans had abandoned!

He was well back past the two good runners before they saw him and began shouting the alarm. Two of the pursuers, thus warned, beat him back to the car. Jim was close after them. They leaped into the auto, and Jim thought he had lost again. But the man at the wheel was making such frantic attempts to get the car started that Jim guessed he knew little about an automobile. The cowboy therefore charged on for the car, sending bullets down close to the frightened pair. That was too much for them. They jumped out and called on their feet to give them surer if slower transportation out of the danger zone.

Jim reached the automobile and gladdened his heart by the hum of the motor. Then he swung the machine around and headed southward. There was no road at all for the first few miles, then only a poor one. However, he drove as recklessly as he dared. He must get there in time to snatch Rita's cattle out of Gardina's clutches. Until that task should be completed, he wanted to forget all about the Hidalgo County sheriff and the new complications with the Mexican officials which his forceful entry and the borrowing of their car would entail.

Over flat stretches, down sandy arroyos, along snake-back ridges, he piloted the powerful automobile where it seemed no car could go. He finally had to leave the machine some eight miles down, because the old road here became impassable. Now Jim bore on steadily to meet the herd, taking short cuts and making the downhill stretches on a trot.

CHAPTER XII

Quirt Welts

RITA was riding with the drags as the cattle drifted along leisurely. Before her, crosswise on the saddle, she carried a little calf that had given out on its sore feet. Many of the grown cattle were sore-footed and weary from the hard trek.

"Only a dozen miles," Martinez smiled across at her. "Then you mus' geeve me nice answer, *mi corazón.*"

Rita did not pretend to smile back. All day she had been unable to shake off that load on her heart. Something tormented her. She was almost willing to listen to Adolfo's endearing words, just to smother forever this other strange, torturing thing within her breast.

"Tonight," Adolfo persisted, "when we camp een starlight, and I come seeng weeth guitar, then you say yes, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Rita murmured, and forced a wan smile to her lips.

All at once she straightened up. Then she dug spurs into her horse's flanks and sent it plunging forward, unmindful of the calf that she held. Yes, her eyes had not fooled her. There came Jim Claypool. He doffed his big sombrero and smiled up at her as she pulled the horse to a halt beside him. The little calf was doing its best to hold on by its forelegs, but Rita had forgotten all about it.

"How did you get back here?" she asked hastily.

Jim caught the calf in his arms and put it on the ground, smiling anew at her forgetfulness of it.

"Walked, ran and rode," he answered her question.

"You mean the sheriff turned you loose?" Rita asked incredulously.

"After a fashion, yes'm."

"You didn't kill him?"

The girl went pale at that thought. Jim wondered why the extreme anxiety in her voice. Was she afraid that he would kill Martinez too?

"No, I didn't kill him," he replied. "Hank turned up in time to free me."

"And now?"

"I aim to beat Gardina's game. He's outfoxed Oñate and is back near here, after yore herd again. I thought this was a fine chance for me to prove where I've stood all along, far as Gardina goes. Can yuh spare me twenty men that'll fight with me? We've got to hurry, Rita."

"Twenty," she exclaimed, "against Gardina's hundreds?"

"He won't send his full force after the cows. He'll have to keep half or more to stand off Oñate when the general does get wise and marches on 'im. Twenty men in that rock gateway back there can stand a mighty big bunch off long enough for yuh to make it to the Border."

"But these ridges are not big mountains like those around El Patio de Dios. The rebels can ride a few miles and find another route through them."

"But they'll sample our power at that gateway first, I figure. Don't yuh want to trust the job to me?"

Rita brought her troubled eyes down to meet his squarely. She seemed to be gazing into the very depths of the cowboy's soul. After all, Jim had offered no proof of his innocence except his return to her, and that might be only part of an attempt to betray the entire outfit into the enemy hands.

Before she could make her decision on the grave matter, however, Martinez came pushing his horse up. He gave Jim a contemptuous look, then turned on Rita. She hastened to repeat the essential facts of Jim's news about Gardina.

"It is all a lie," Martinez exclaimed. "Nothing but a gringo trick to get this herd. The *Americanos* want Gardina to keep on fighting, so they can sell him guns and things. These cowboys are only cunning agents."

Martinez was speaking boldly indeed, for he knew that Jim understood the Spanish language that he used. The explanation of his boldness lay in the nearness of a dozen riders following him, evidently at his order. He had the American in his power, he thought, especially if he could make Rita turn against him entirely. Jim was the kind who took no insult because of odds against him. But he was trying manfully to restrain his temper just now, because of the girl's presence.

"Hombre," he said, with a voice that trembled in anger, "I've got a good notion that you and I will have plenty of things to settle mighty *pronto*, without that abuse for yuh to answer for."

Martinez glanced back, and saw that his men were within easy pistol shot. That lent him still more rash courage. He was making a grandstand play to the girl, while at the same time seeking to cast Jim in the light of a mere roughneck. Jim's restraint appeared to convince Martinez that the cowboy had lost his nerve in the face of such odds.

"You gringo dog!" he cried, spurring his horse forward suddenly. "Thees ees way Judge Adolfo Martinez deal weeth outlaw trash!"

Martinez brought his quirt up for a blow. Jim sprang backward. But his heel hung on a stick, tripping him. He caught himself before he fell. But while he was off balance, Martinez brought the lash down across his shoulders with terrific power. Then he struck at Jim's face, clearly with the intent of lashing him across the eyes. The blow missed the cowboy's eyes, and cut a welt across his cheek.

Jim knew that to shoot would invite the fire of every man riding toward him. And he did not want to kill Martinez just now.

Martinez struck a third blow across his shoulders so hard that Jim winced under

its terrific pain. But he seized the man's wrist and tore him from the saddle with a savagery that ignored all fear of consequences. He lifted a short left jab up to the Mexican's chin that jolted his head back. Then he snatched the quirt from Martinez's hand and began pouring it onto its owner.

Martinez cried out in pain and protest. Jim answered with more resounding whacks across his back. The Mexican broke to run, Jim right on his heels, dealing blow after blow to his back and hips. Every second the cowboy expected to have guns roar behind him and cut him down. But there would be some satisfaction in going this way.

Martinez swerved over to the men who had been riding up, and Jim stopped short. There was Rita with a gun threatening the men who would have come to the judge's rescue, even over her order. One of them took Martinez up behind him and carried him away. Four followed them. The others lingered, to offer abject apology to the señorita for their rash disobedience to her first order not to interfere with the thrashing which Martinez had brought on himself.

"You see," she responded, in their tongue, "that this American can and will fight. In spite of the way I treated him, he has come back to help us. For Gardina is rushing back on us. I want you men to go with Señor Claypool, to hold the Gardina gang until we can get the herd across the Line. Diego, pick about fifteen more men to go with him."

The men moved off, jabbering in low, excited voices among themselves. Rita looked back at Jim. The welt across his cheek was oozing red.

"Can you forgive me, Jim?" she begged contritely.

She dropped from her horse and extended her hand. Her soft, dark eyes burned with a light that had never been there before, and a promise of tears made them glisten more alluringly. Every minute counted now in meeting Gardina and turning Hank away. Nevertheless, Jim took the proffered hand, and did not seem to realize how tight he gripped it.

"I'm due to thank yuh a heap," he smiled. "What say we have a general—a—well, a complete understandin', tonight after the herd's across?"

In Jim's tone and look now was an open avowal of his hopes, when the fighting should be done. Rita had to banish a catch in her throat. Jim started moving away, as if fearful that he had said too much.

"*Hasta esta noche*—until tonight," she murmured, barely loud enough for him to hear. "And please be careful, Jim."

The American hastened to get a horse and swing his score of riders together. He saw no more of Martinez, but Rita waved him a hasty farewell, then disappeared into a clump of walnuts, as though she were anxious to be alone.

They were only a short distance south of the drags when Jim began scouting up along a ridge that overlooked a low, short plain. He saw no sign of an invading band. But a lone rider came out of an arroyo more than a mile back of Jim, and bore southward at a trot. Jim recognized the sorrel which Hank had been riding, then identified Hank's straight body.

"Reckon the kid is comin' to help me," he mused to himself. "He's plumb true blue in his heart, that Hank is."

Jim hurried his men on to the place where he meant to make his defense. It was a narrow, natural gateway where a creek cut through a low but sharp-combed ridge of rock. As Rita had pointed out, the rebels could shift to the east a few miles and find another gap in the ridge. But this was the natural road in and here he could delay them for a time at least, then harass their movements when they sought another gap. He stationed his men in the gateway and on the rocks above it.

Then he said to them: "I better scout out a little, to make sure they're comin' this way."

First, though, he tried to intercept Hank. He wanted to make sure that his brother was up to no more mischief, before he scouted for rebel invaders. But when he got out onto higher ground, he could see nothing of the younger man.

Hurrying on eastward, he cut Hank's

trail. It had continued south a little distance, then cut off abruptly to the east. What could Hank be up to now? Jim followed him a few minutes longer. He was nervous about leaving his men in the gap. The attack might come any moment. He was just as anxious, though, to account for Hank's strange conduct.

He decided finally that Hank was merely hanging around, unwilling to admit himself ready to fight for Rita and yet sure to be in a fight in her behalf, if one came up. He started back, taking a shorter route over a ridge. Down near the foot of the slope he slowed down to examine the sandy bed of an arroyo. A body of horsemen had passed down it. They were heading for the gateway, and they were on the inside of this gate! They had slipped through another gap farther to the east, no doubt under the piloting of some soldier who knew the country.

This meant that they were going to fall in behind Jim's men. He went cold with the realization of it. He had placed those men in a veritable death trap, unless he could get them out in time. If they should be massacred in the gap, Rita would think that he betrayed them purposely and hold him responsible for it the rest of her life.

He struck hard spurs into his horse's ribs and set off to go around the invading band. But they were riding hard, and heading straight for the gateway. From the top of a brushy loma he sighted them a few hundred yards ahead, nearly a hundred strong. And they had Hank there with them, a prisoner! Jim knew by this that Hank had suspected the presence of the enemy inside the rock comb when he had cut off to the east so abruptly. But, as it was later disclosed, the impetuous cowboy had ridden almost into their very arms, in a thicket of cedar brush.

Jim hardly dared think what Hank's fate might be. The leader of this band of rebels was Billy Braxton, Hank's former friend. Braxton might favor him, or on the other hand he might be the most bitter because of Hank's desertion to Rita's side.

Upon seeing Jim, Braxton detailed a dozen men back to kill or capture him, too. Jim was in a tough spot, indeed. If he stopped to take care of himself, the *paisanos* in the gateway would be slaughtered. He could not whip a dozen rebels in time to get away and warn the men, no matter how luck favored him. His only hope was to lure them away if he could, then dodge them and outride them back to the gap. He had to save Hank some way, too, but that could wait until he had warned the *paisanos,* for Hank seemed in no immediate danger from his former *compadres.*

He therefore swung back north, his horse on a dead run. At the top of the ridge again he waved exultantly and shouted in Spanish, "Hey, my friends, here they are—come on, quick!"

That ruse did not seem to fool the rebel dozen, however, for they came charging on. Jim had a real test here. If his trick failed, he would lose his life and also gain the everlasting hate of Rita Logan. He held his ground, kept waving his arm and shouting, "Hurry, boys—this way. We have them cornered!"

The rebels still kept riding for him. He threw all reason to the winds, put spurs to his horse and headed straight for them, shouting jubilantly, "Men, get this little bunch first!"

That was too much for the rebels. They were sure now that he had a big bunch of Federals at his back, just over the crest of the ridge. They whirled around and took the other way, looking over their shoulders as they fled. Jim quickly put a shaft of uprearing rock between them and himself, then cut off for the gap again.

He fought his horse in sheer desperation. If he died doing it, he must warn those helpless *paisanos,* for their own sake and his own, too. This detachment of rebels had not fired a shot at him yet, though. Doubtless they had been ordered to make as little noise as possible, in order that the main bunch could surprise the gateway guards more completely. Emboldened by this thought, Jim raced across open ground that brought him into range of their Springfields. By this near cut he might beat the main bunch to the gap yet.

The little band still held its fire and made a horse race of it. One man, on a rangy

roan, was gaining on Jim's tired horse in spite of all the urging the cowboy could do. The bold, black-mustached fellow got close enough to begin swinging the loop of his sixty-foot rawhide riata. Jim whipped out his six-shooter, twisted about in the saddle and fired at the ducking rebel. But the cowboy's horse was unused to the roar of a gun from its back. It reared and leaped aside so suddenly that it sprained the pastern joint of its right hind leg. Then it began to limp and slow down.

Jim decided on a bolder move. He leaped to the ground and ran back toward the rebels. He had got the would-be roper. Two more rebels fell off their horses and jerked their rifles toward Jim. They knew now that they had to fire, no matter whom it alarmed. Jim dived for the partial cover of a small wash, but the men fired at his horse instead of trying for him. Their second shot struck the animal in the head. Having thus cut off his return, the men jumped back to their saddles and dashed away.

Jim had lost. He fired after them, hoping vainly to knock one from the saddle and get his horse. But the range was too long for his six-shooter, and even the wounded man kept riding from there. He emptied his Colt twice, nevertheless, trusting that his *paisanos* would hear it and be on the watch for danger from this side, too. But there was a considerable wind blowing toward him, making it very doubtful whether the sound of his Colt would carry to the gap.

To try to warn the *paisanos* was all he now could do for them. But he might get back to the herd yet and prepare those there for what defense they could make. He therefore struck out on a run in the direction of the Cross L cattle.

Before long he heard the sudden rattle of rifles. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead as he realized that the living men, whom he had left only a short time before this, were now perishing in that hail of rebel bullets.

In a moment the firing lessened, then stopped. Possibly that meant surrender for those left alive. The silence that followed was terrible. It seemed to Jim to scream aloud of the loathing that Rita would have for him forever. And she was the one person in the world whom he least could bear to have remember him as a traitor.

Guessing at the shortest route, he ran on foot until exhaustion slowed him down to a steady trot. He wore himself down entirely, and still he was more than half a mile from the Cross L herd. Then he heard a new volley over where he thought the drags ought to be. The rebels were attacking the peons guarding the herd. The firing was brisk, then dropped to ragged volleys. The peons were putting up a fight. And Rita would stick by them, in spite of peril to herself.

Jim kept driving on, oblivious to weary legs and choking breath. Then a great number of riders dashed out of the brush farther east and galloped toward him. More rebels? No, they were Federals, a skirmishing party of General Oñate's main army!

CHAPTER XIII

Tumbleweed Truth

OVER at the herd, the only two survivors from the brief struggle at the gateway came galloping up. Their cries of warning were not needed, however, for a rebel squadron broke over the hill in battle formation.

Rita's peons fled in panic. But she rallied some forty-odd into an old stone house that squatted close to the trail. The rebels surrounded them and demanded their surrender, on peril of their lives if they did not give up immediately. At the same time, one of the wounded men from the gateway was telling how Jim Claypool had left them and gone in the very direction from which had come the band of rebels which had fallen in behind them while another larger band had attacked them from the other side. Claypool had betrayed them, they declared.

Rita looked at the frightened faces of the peons crowded together there in the three rooms. Her own face was the color of a bleached skull. These peons were only primitive, peace-loving men of the

soil, wholly unfit for combat with veterans of even so brief a campaign as this revolution had been. She felt now that it would only mean useless butchery of these poor fellows, if she further prolonged the struggle.

Besides, Martinez and half a dozen more peons had succeeded in getting only to a little goat corral fifty yards away before the rebels cut off their flight to the house. The low stone walls of the corral afforded them fair protection. From there Martinez was keeping up a steady fire at the rebels, holding them back somewhat from the house. Be it said to his credit, Martinez was showing praiseworthy courage just now, either because he knew he had to fight for his life or from a desire to appear the hero in the girl's eyes. Rita was unwilling to see him fall in a fight that promised only defeat in the end.

The only alternative, though, was surrender, with the consequent loss of her entire herd. As she weighed the decision swiftly in her mind, unutterable anguish crushed down upon her soul. She was having to surrender her herd to the destroyers. Already the rebels had her beloved Patio de Dios. Several of her faithful *paisanos* lay dead; others writhed in the agony of wounds—thanks to the perfidy of Jim Claypool!

What a fool she had been, she chided herself remorsefully, for trusting him that last time. And what a still greater fool she had been for ever thinking that she might have cared for that cowboy. A date with him for tonight—what a silly thing to have cherished all these hours!

"Oh, I wish I had the hate of Satan himself to give that man!" she thought bitterly.

As if uncannily sensing his opportunity, Martinez thrust his head and shoulders into a break in the low rock wall next to the house. He cupped his hands to his mouth, to call to her, "Rita, thees look bad for me. But eef I not die for you, weel you geeve me that sweet promise?"

Rita knew what he meant. Never before had she thought she could love this man. But it was different now. No other future invited her. Something had taken life in her heart, then died, had been murdered. Why not reward Adolfo for his constant love? He was rising to a gallantry that she had never suspected in him before. After all, he was a Mexican of fine Spanish blood, and she, too, was a girl of Mexico.

Adolfo was repeating his question in a voice laden with pathos and endearment. Rita all at once flung all reasoning aside, and called back, "Yes!"

"Tonight, eef we can cross Line?" Adolfo then asked eagerly.

"Yes, tonight," she promised.

The lull in the fighting would not last long. She must give her decision to surrender or fight, and very quickly. The rebels were forming more determined lines on all sides of them. Back behind in one group she caught sight of Hank Claypool. She did not know that he was a prisoner. Her natural conclusion was that Hank had rejoined his old rebel comrades, for his former friend, Billy Braxton, was still commanding this enlarged unit. Any moment she expected to see Jim out there, too.

A lone rebel rider came dashing down across an open spot. He did not halt until he reached Braxton, the rebel commander. Rita saw him talking excitedly to the American and pointing back to the northwest. Braxton and his aides got down from their horses and put their heads together in a hasty council of war. While they conferred, she saw Hank talking to the men about him. Then Rita discovered for the first time that Hank was a prisoner. One of the men nodded his head in assent to whatever Hank had been asking.

Whereupon, the cowboy took a piece of paper from his pocket and began scribbling. Finishing the note, he thrust it into the branches of a tumbleweed the size of a bushel basket, and threw it toward the stone house. The wind carried it along and blew it against a wall. What was the message?

"It is only some further trickery," she told herself.

Nevertheless, she stepped out to where the weed had lodged. Then she stood

there scanning the note, in full view of her enemies. It read:

"Dear Boots:

Don't blame Jim. The rebs captured me and then cut him off before he could get back to his men. Thought I better tell you, in case it does happen to make any difference to you—it sure does to him—for I got a feeling that your boy friend spy better do his confessing now.

Adios
Señor Hank Claypool

P. S. I always have shot rattlesnakes before letting them get away."

The same tempestuous Hank, as changeable and fickle as the wind, and yet man enough to do his best for Jim. Rita puzzled over the message. But that last line seemed to sound a strange, ominous warning of mysterious purpose. She was conscious at the same time of a new, throbbing hope that began to burst into her heart, despite all her solid convictions.

"You little goose," she thought with a mind that was all chaos, "you used your head right in promising Adolfo to marry him, and you'll keep that promise, come all hell and high water, as Dad used to say."

Hank had turned back to Billy Braxton, who was remounting. She saw him speak earnestly to Braxton, as if arguing, when Braxton and his aides seemed impatient, even frightened. As if in keen regret, Braxton nodded his head to Hank's demand, and handed him two six-shooters.

Again Rita's heart went weak. Was Hank no prisoner after all? Braxton gave a signal. Rita thought Hank was going to lead the charge against them. But the whole rebel band broke back the other way. All but Hank. He leaped to a horse's back and let out a splitting yell. There he came, charging hard and straight for the corral where Martinez lay. He brought the two six-shooters down into play on the corral wall.

Before Rita could get into the house and stop them, her men poured hasty bullets at the lone enemy. Martinez and his companions in the corral likewise were meeting the one-man attack with hot lead. But they were shooting with such excited haste that Hank was still alive and bearing down on them.

He charged right up to within twenty yards of the corral wall, guiding his horse with his knees and whipping the two Colts down swiftly, one after the other. The guns were spitting their angry fire at only one target, the head of Adolfo Martinez. What a picture of a fighting cowboy he made—alone, utterly mad, utterly doomed!

Martinez ducked down out of sight when the second ball struck on a rock by his head. Hank charged on, unmindful of the fact that a dozen guns barked at him now from door, windows and corral wall. Martinez, seeing that he must stop that crazed charge or die, thrust his head and shoulders over to fire. Hank fired twice more. The second ball caught Martinez in the forehead.

Then the intrepid Hank whirled his horse and went dashing away. He raised his old cowboy hat and waved it in defiance. He tried to give forth a Texas cowboy yell. But something seemed to be wrong. A little farther and Hank was reeling in his saddle. He clung onto the horn and let the horse have its head. It followed the mad retreat into which the entire rebel band had broken.

Rita looked upon that flight in amazement. Then from behind the house there came a new thunder of hoofs. Oñate's regulars! There seemed hundreds of them. From the other side came another long wave of Federal chargers. The rebels were surrounded hopelessly. They surrendered so quickly that Rita was bewildered by the turn of affairs. It was some time before she learned that General Oñate had been the real fox, after all. He had let Gardina think he was outwitting him in cutting back to grab the herd. But Oñate had laid a trap that first caught Gardina's main band almost in its entirety, then this detachment.

Not only that, but the backbone of the revolution was broken. For Oñate had decoyed some of the rebels out of the Patio and annihilated them. It would be only a matter of days, he promised Rita, until the few remaining would be glad to accept pardons for agreement to surrender.

Before hearing any of all this, and while the Federals were still closing in on the rebels, Rita went running out to where

Hank had disappeared over a little ridge, still clinging to his "dish-pan" saddle horn. But he was on the ground now, and there was Jim bending over his reckless brother. Hank had been riddled by bullets. He had made that last wild charge knowing full well this would be his lot. Jim, riding up with the Federals, had seen his brother make the wild charge, but he had been powerless to stop Hank.

"I fixed—it for yuh—Jim," Hank was saying. "Told 'er you—was okeh—and killed that rattlesnake—for yuh. Good old Billy Braxton let me—do it when I—begged him for the chance."

Hank's hand came up weakly and touched the scar on Jim's cheek almost caressingly, as though he were thinking that his debt to Jim was paid. Then, with eyes fast dimming, he caught sight of Rita standing near, with bent head and tear-filled eyes.

"Boots!" he smiled wanly, with his last word.

CHAPTER XIV

Starlight Bliss

THAT night the big Cross L herd bedded down not far from the stone house. Now, only the beef stuff would be taken on across the Border. The remainder of the herd would be rested a few days, then started on the trail back to El Patio de Dios. What a joyous homecoming that was going to be!

Rita had taken matters into her own hands considerably the last few hours. She kept it up by going out to where Jim was saddling a horse, as if he might be slipping away. With her she carried Jim's gold, which had been taken from the dead Adolfo's possession, with Jim's name still on the leathern pouch.

"Where are you going, cowboy?" she demanded of him.

Jim nodded northward. "To give up, and stand trial," he answered.

"Jim, were you not at fault in that shooting, that time you got the scar?"

"I never could see I was. They'd all hopped Hank, in a frame-up to kill the kid."

"Then I've got news for you. Among the rebels captured are five American renegades, three of them wanted in New Mexico for robbery and murder. General Oñate says he can arrange with the governor of New Mexico to have you promised immunity from arrest on that Lordsburg charge, in exchange for these renegades who were real outlaws and killers."

"Yuh've done that for me?" Jim asked incredulously.

"Look what you did for me."

A long silence fell over them. Fortunately for her, she had another excuse for breaking the embarrassing spell.

"And General Oñate captured another man," she told him, "who had a receipt on him. It was Garcia, and it was the receipt you gave him when you thought you made a bona fide sale of my cattle. This Mexican confessed that poor Adolfo hired him to take the place of the agent that General Oñate had sent. Will you forgive me, Jim, for all these many hard things?"

"Sure, that's all right," he declared.

But he seemed to be under some restraint. Rita feared that he still might believe she had cared for Hank, especially when she knew he remembered that one rash kiss she had bestowed upon Hank that night in order to torment Jim. But there was another kiss that she remembered with turbulent heart yet.

"I believe fully in you now, Jim," she went on. "That is, except that you will steal."

"Steal?" he echoed, suddenly coming alive.

"Yes. I caught you at it, red-handed."

"I'm not arguin' with yuh about anythin' like that," he snapped. "Reckon I better be ridin' north, after all."

"I did catch you," Rita insisted, with mischief in her voice now, "and you know it. You—you thought I was asleep. Remember, up there on the pass trail?"

"Rita," he cried, "yuh was awake?"

"Yes, but I've dreamed of it ever since."

Jim's mighty arms came stealing about her. Even by starlight, Rita's black eyes glistened with two happy tears as she raised her trembling lips to meet the mad crush of that cowboy's kiss.

The Sheriff's Sister

By C. Wiles Hallock

The sheriff's sister was always sticking her head into the law and order business, and had her brother worrying himself to death about her. It would be a big weight off his mind, he admitted, if she'd only get married.

LOPIN' down to Eureka from the Dumont ranch one summer evenin', me and Jodie Blackburn got to swappin' "if's." Swappin' "if's" is one of them ungainful but harmless pastimes indulged in by nightherd rannigans and other restless saddle-straddlers when they gits bowed down with melancholy and craves to feel sorry for themselves.

"If I had a million dollars," says Jodie Blackburn, top-rider of the Dumont ranch, "Pete, if I had me a million dollars, I'd be total diff'rent from what I am!" He sighed mournful. "I'd go places. I'd do lots of diff'rent things!"

"Waal, I ain't never craved to be no diff'rent from what I am," says I. "Guess mebbe that's my main weakness of character—unless you'd call it a weakness of character to be contented with rammin' round all over Nevady and never cravin' to go anywheres else. Now, if I had a million dollars, I'd take $4.98 of it and I'd buy me a box of first-class seegars. Outside of that, though, I can't think of nothin' offhand I'd want so much money for. It'd be a bother to me."

"Wouldn't you admire to own the Dumont ranch, 'stead of just bein' foreman of it?" snorts Jodie.

"Can't say as I would, at my age," says I. "I don't take life nowhere near as serious as I did when I was a young fellar like you. I'm havin' fun. I like Nevady. Bein' as I've lived here, man and boy, more'n sixty years, and never seen no other country, it's smarter to like it than to wish I was somewheres else. I'm fond of buckarooin'. Long as I ain't tied down to no one outfit, I'm plenty satisfied. When I git restless I drift to another spread. I don't crave money worries."

"If I had a million dollars," says Jodie—

But just then a team and buckboard come foggin' to'rds us around a bend in the road, and we had to jump our broncs sideways to let 'em pass. There was two people in the rig—a feller decked out real dudish and a pretty gal with taffy-colored hair, tricked up like a rodeo rider. The gal was drivin'. She handled the broncs plumb

reckless, and the feller didn't look to be enjoyin' the ride. As they passed, the impish young lady waved her hand and smiled at us cordial, just like she knowed us. Jodie and me jerked off our hats and waved back.

Jodie stared at 'em till they was out of sight. Then he sighed mournful. "That there's a doggoned beautiful gal, Pete," he growled. "That there's 'bout the beautifulest young lady ever I set eyes on!" He gazed up the road like he was bewitched. "If I had a million dollars—"

"Young feller," says I, "your trouble ain't nothin' that a million dollars would cure, or git what you need!"

"How do you know what I need?" he yells.

"It wouldn't take hardly no sense a-tall to know that you'd ought to meet up with a nice little lady like the one that just passed us," says I.

The lad didn't say nothin' more till just as we was lopin' into Eureka. Then, "Fat chance a sun-baked saddle-gawk like me's got to meet up with a swell gal like her!" he growled.

NOW, any way you look at him, Jodie Blackburn ain't no gawk. Settin' acrost a table from him in Blackie Ballard's Royal Rest'rant that evenin', I sized him up real critical in regards to style and aspect. I couldn't find no flaws worth mentionin', except a gloomy scowl. He didn't hardly speak civil when Shuriff Sam Crofut walked in and stopped at our table to pass the time of day.

"Howdy, shuriff!" says I. "Set down and eat your supper with us, and see if you can git the kid here cheered up so's he'll enjoy his visit to town."

"I just got back from over in the Whitepine country, huntin' for a feller which stole a hoss and buggy from Vaughan's Livery Stable yesterday," boomed Sam. "Didn't have no luck, though." He set beside Jodie and ordered a stack of wheatcakes. "How's tricks up Pine Creek way?" he went on. "What ails you, Jodie? Got a stummick ache?"

"The boy's bowed down with woe account of heart trouble!" says I. "He seen a good-lookin' gal a few minutes ago. She waved her hand at him, and he fell head over heels in love with her. But I ain't blamin' him none. She shore was a dazzler!"

"Who was the lady?" says Sam, pokin' Jodie in the ribs playful.

"We never seen her before," says I. "She fogged past us in a buckboard, 'bout a mile up the road. Had a slicked-up dude with her. She was a beaut, all right—with taffy-colored hair—"

"Hold on!" roars the shuriff, jumpin' to his feet. "Did you say taffy-colored hair?"

"The most beautiful gal ever I laid eyes on!" growls Jodie. "Set down!"

But the shuriff didn't set down. "Gosh a'mighty!" he barked, plumb excited. He grabbed his hat. "Betty, that's who it was!" He started to'rds the door.

"Wait a minute!" says I. "Who is she?"

He didn't stop. "Betty, she's my sister!" he bawled back at us. Then he charged out of the dump like a forest ranger goin' to a fire.

This was a big surprise to me and Jodie, 'cause we didn't know Sam Crofut had a sister. But what got me plumb flabbergasted was Jodie jumpin' up and grabbin' his sky-piece. "Listen, Pete," he croaks, his black eyes flashin' fire and his cheeks flamin' red, "I'm goin' after the shuriff, see? I—I gotta meet his sister!" And he went dashin' out before I could say Jack Robertson.

Just then the waitress brung the wheatcakes Sam had ordered. Waal, I didn't see no sense in all them wheatcakes goin' to waste, and besides, I wanted to think the astonishin' proceedin's over. So I just set there and finished my own grub, and then et them wheatcakes for dessert.

Me and Jodie had fogged down to Eureka from the ranch for purposes of recreation and fun. It was a Saturday night, and we wasn't due back till Monday mornin', so I'd figgered to have a rip-roarin' time with the lad, shootin' pool at the Bonton Billiard Parlor and mebbe havin' a session of red-dawg and meetin' up with other waddies from outfits round and about. But with Jodie gittin' bedazzled by that charmin' gal and trailin' off after the shuriff, my plans of pleasure was nipped in the bud.

I didn't crave to go lookin' for amusements by myself. On the other hand, I was plumb curious 'bout the shuriff's sister and her dude friend and the peculiar behavin' of Sam. And I didn't blame Jodie none for wantin' to meet up with the gal.

I git my greatest joy out of life from connivin' with Cupid to overcome the hazards of Fate which makes the goin' tough for young, deservin' lovers. So when I finished stowin' away them wheatcakes, I made up my mind to horn in and find out what the peculiar proceedin's was all about.

Nobody in Eureka could tell me what had become of the shuriff. Nobody seen Jodie after he went bustin' out of the Royal Rest'rant. So I forked my bronc and headed up Pine Creek way, figgerin' Shuriff Sam just natcherly went trailin' after his sister and the dude, with Jodie follerin' him.

It was a still, hot night. The moon was risin', but there was a heavy cloudbank hidin' it from view. I was headin' up the main road—the same road Jodie and me come to town on, goin' northwest, and I was hurryin' my bronc along in hopes of catchin' up with Sam and Jodie. The way I sized things up, the shuriff's sister and that dude must have been headin' for Summit, 'bout twenty mile northwest of Eureka. Mebbe they was goin' to a dance there, account of the young folks round and about Summit held shindigs frequent in the schoolhouse on Saturday nights. So when I come to a fork in the road four miles from Eureka, where the Dumont ranch trail branches off to the west, I kept straight ahead on the main road.

I hadn't went more'n a couple miles from the fork when I heard hosses snufflin' 'longside the road to my right. Finally I made out a rig and a team standin' under a tree 'bout forty feet away. But there didn't seem to be no human bein's close at hand. I rode over to the rig. There wasn't nobody in it, but just as I'd suspicioned, it was a buckboard with a bronc team. Like a flash, a forebodin' of foul play come into my mind, and a cold shiver run up my spine. I had a feelin' that somethin' turrible had happened to the shuriff's sister!

I set there on my hoss plumb cold, tryin' to think what to do—which way to go—where to start lookin' for the pore gal. It was pitch dark. The moon was still behind the clouds, and the silence seemed almost overpowerin', like as if a storm or a wild hullabulloo of strife and fury was about to bust loose. I had a powerful cravin' to hightail back to Eureka as fast as my hoss could run. But I couldn't git the idear out of my head that somethin' dire had befell the shuriff's sister, and I'd ought to be huntin' for her. So I decided to strike out acrost the open country eastward, but before I got movin'—

"Put up your hands!"

It was a soft, low voice—the voice of a gal—right behind me. I almost fell out of my saddle. But I reached for the sky.

"Don't move or I'll shoot!" says the lady. "Who are you?"

"My name's Pete Carberry," says I. "I'm a cowpoke from the Dumont ranch. Me and Jodie Blackburn—"

"What are you doing here?" she interrupted. Her voice was pretty, but plenty hostile.

"I was lookin' for you," says I. "I mean—you're Shuriff Sam Crofut's sister, ain't you? Sam and Jodie Blackburn and me was—"

"Why should you be looking for me?" she interrupted again. "Get off your horse, but keep your hands up!"

I done her biddin'. But I was riled, account of the way she kept interruptin' my words. "Why should you pull a gun on me and order me around?" I yelps. "I'm a law-abidin' hombre."

"Pipe down!" says the gal, *"I'm* asking the questions." She stepped up and took my sixgun off me. "Now tell me why you were looking for me, but keep your voice down!"

"Waal," says I, "d'you remember the two fellers on horseback you waved to 'bout a mile from Eureka when you passed by in the buckboard this evenin'? Waal, I'm one of them fellers, and Jodie Blackburn was the other. We met up with Sam Crofut in town and remarked 'bout passin' you, and he—"

"He got all excited and charged away on his steed, I suppose!" says the gal. "Did

you tell him there was a man with me?"

"Yes, ma'am," says I. "That's why he rushed off lookin' for you. 'It was Betty—she's my sister!' he says, and rushed away. Then Jodie Blackburn went after him, 'cause he got all excited. But I stayed calm and et my supper, 'cause I don't crave to go rammin' round on a empty stummick. Then I started out lookin' for Sam and Jodie, and here I am. You ain't saw anythin' of Sam and Jodie, have you?"

"No, I haven't!" she murmured. "Heavens! What a mix-up!" She put her gun away and handed mine over to me. "I'm sorry, Mr. Barberry, that I had to be so hard-boiled with you, but I really had to. And I can't explain why! Oh, dear!" She got excited all of a sudden and started pacin' around.

"Carberry is the name," says I. "I don't mind about you bein' hard-boiled. But mebbe it would be better if you was to explain a little somethin' in regards to what you're doin' out here. You can trust me. I'm a old-timer round here. Fact is, I'm knowed over most of Nevady as a kind of special friend and guide to young folks in distress."

"It isn't that I don't trust you, Mr. Carberry," she said in low tones. "If you're a friend of Sam's, of course I trust you! But I've given a solemn promise—I've pledged my word—not to disclose the nature of a somewhat mysterious situation. So I just can't tell you what it's all about!"

"Waal, I ain't askin' you to break no promises," says I. "But I can put one and one together and see that you're in some kind of danger, account of pledgin' your word. And bein' as Sam Crofut is a good friend of mine, and bein' as you're his sister, it's my duty to stay close to you, which I aim to do same even if you don't like it!"

"You're right about its being a dangerous enterprise," she answered. "And frankly, I'm glad you're here, and grateful to you for saying you'll stand by me. So let's get going!"

"Where to?" says I.

"To an old log house about a mile due east of here. If you really mean that you're going to stay with me, without asking questions, tie your horse to the tree here. We have to go on foot, and we have to get there without anybody seeing us, if possible."

So I tied my bronc 'longside of the bronc team and we struck out straight east from the road. I couldn't see no good reason why the gal couldn't tell me somethin' in regards to the goin's-on. I craved to ask her what had become of the dude feller. But I knowed 'twasn't no use, so I just follered her, keepin' mum.

WE was walkin' acrost the open prairie. It was rough goin' in the dark, account of the ground bein' billowy with hummocks and scarred with arroyos and dry washes. So we went stumblin' along slow and silent for quite a spell, watchin' the ground close to keep from fallin' into the arroyos. Now and again the gal would stop and listen, but we didn't hear a sound except our own breathin'. Then all of a sudden the moon come out from behind the clouds and lit up the landscape so bright we could see all around for miles. But there wasn't nobody in sight.

"Gee! We've got to go slow and careful now," whispered the gal. "Why couldn't that moon have stayed under cover just a little longer?" She grabbed onto my arm. "Come on, duck down into this gully!" and we clambered down a steep bank into a dry wash 'bout ten feet deep.

I took a good look at the young lady while we was restin' a spell. She was a little more'n usual tall for a gal, 'bout twenty years old, and she'd weigh 'bout a hundred and twenty. Her soft, wavy hair was the color of molasses candy and she had wide, blue eyes fringed with long, dark lashes. She was that beauteous, I couldn't catch my breath while she was lookin' straight at me.

"Come on, keep close to the cut-bank," she says. So we went ahead along the bed of the arroyo, crouchin' down in the shadow of the left bank. We hadn't went fifteen steps till I stumbled over somethin' sorta soft and yieldin'. I picked up a package of somethin' wrapped in paper. I tore away the paper, and almost keeled over. It

was a bundle of money—twenty-dollar bills —'bout six inches thick!

"Holy heifers!" I gasped. "Look here!"

The gal stared with a peculiar gleam in her wide eyes. "How much is there?" she whispered.

"Fifty or a hundred thousand dollars!" says I, lookin' on the ground to see if there was any more. I got kinda dizzy. I'd never saw that much money before in my whole life. I shoved the package inside my shirt and we started on, keepin' our eyes peeled for more bundles of bills. We didn't go more'n a dozen yards before the shuriff's sister found one. It was the same size as the one I had, but it was packed with fifty-dollar bills!

The gal stuffed them bills inside her waist, and I began wonderin' all sorts of things concernin' the strange affair I was mixin' into. I guess she knowed I was doin' some tall thinkin', 'cause she come up close to me and whispered, "Mr. Tarjerry, it is only fair that you should know we are on the trail of two desperate criminals. I intended to tell you this just before we got to the house, where they are supposed to be hiding out. But we may be closer to them than I thought." She drawed her gun. "We'd better be on guard!"

"That bein' the case," says I, pullin' my shootin' iron, "Sam had ought to be here. Trailin' crooks is a shuriff's job; it ain't no chore for a gal. And where's that dude you brought out here?"

"I'll explain everything later," she answered. "We can't be far from the house now!" So we went on, keepin' in the shadow of the arroyo bank. But we was watchin' the ground to see if there was any more packages of money strewed about. The arroyo made a sharp turn to the left. Just as we reached the turnin' point, two men jumped out in front of us.

"Stick 'em up!" growled one of the fellers, shovin' a gun in my face.

"Drop them gats, both of you!" snarled the other one, coverin' Betty Crofut. "And don't make a sound, or we'll croak you."

We done as we was told. One of the hombres picked up our shootin' irons. "Well, well!" he growls. "A good-lookin' jane out walkin' in the moonlight with her grandpa!"

They was turrible tough-lookin' customers. "Who are you birds?" snarls one of 'em.

"This lady is the Queen of Spain!" says I. "And I'm the King of Siam. Lay them guns down and I'll knock the blocks off the both of you!"

"Chee! A tough guy!" says the one, coverin' us. He yanked the package of money out of my shirt. Then he took the one from Miss Betty. "Look, Monk, they found some of our jack!" He throwed the bundles on the ground. "Now, listen! You two scram outa this ditch and stand still when you get on top of the bank—see? Don't get funny, or we'll let the moonlight through you! Make it snappy!"

We climbed out of the arroyo with the crooks right at our heels. Up on the level, we seen a log house less'n a quarter of a mile due east from us. "Now, march to'rds that dump over there and keep your traps shut!" growled the one called Monk. And we marched.

If the shuriff's sister was scared, she didn't show it. Her pretty, red lips was set in a grim, straight line. Her eyes was flashin', but there wasn't no tears on her cheeks. I wasn't feelin' any too good myself, but I shore admired her spunk. As we marched along in front of them two ruffians, I was prayin' that Jodie and Shuriff Sam would pick up our trail mighty *pronto*. From the kind of clothes the hombres had on, I knowed they was reg'lar big-town thugs that would just as soon murder us as look at us. I figgered the odds was even that the shuriff might never see his sister again, and the Dumont ranch might be lookin' for a new foreman Monday mornin'.

When we got to the door of the log house, Miss Betty said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Marbury!" And there was quite a quaver in her voice.

"Carberry's the name," says I. "It's okeh, little gal. I'm your friend!"

"Shut up, you saps!" says the feller that wasn't called Monk. He went inside the house and lit a lamp.

Then, "Get on in there!" growled Monk.

WE was in a dingy room that didn't have no furniture except a kitchen table and two chairs. But in one corner lay a feller on the floor, bound hand and foot, with a handkerchief tied over his face. Miss Betty cried out, "Oh, Mr. Burgess!" Then I knowed he was the feller I and Jodie seen in the buckboard with her on our way to town.

Mr. Burgess tried to answer, but he was gagged. Then, while Monk was threatenin' to blow our heads off, the other crook tied me hand and foot with a rope and shoved me down on the floor in the corner opposite where the dude was. There was a hole where the floor planks was broke, so the blackguard bound my ankles to a floor-joist. Then he cinched Miss Betty's hands behind her.

"Well, gents," says Monk, "we're scrammin' now—with the wren!" He throwed an arm round Miss Betty's neck, throttlin' her, and put his hand over her mouth so she couldn't scream. "And it's good-by forever, Mr. Burgess, and Grandpa Cow Dairy!" He dragged the pore gal outside, laughin' fiendish. The other dirty skunk delib'rately kicked the table over. The kerosene lamp, still burnin', fell onto the floor. Then he went out and padlocked the door behind him!

Waal, I won't say I wasn't perspirin' freely. I strained at them ropes on my wrists and ankles, but it didn't do me no good. With that lighted lamp on the floor, I knowed Mr. Burgess and me was gonna git plenty hot before help come—if it ever did come. Mr. Burgess groaned and mumbled like as if he knowed what we was up against. But I hadn't even started thinkin' out a fittin' and proper prayer to utter before a hullabulloo busted loose outside.

Miss Betty screamed. Then there was a yell. And then I was durned sure I heard the pound of hosses' hoofs approachin'. I twisted and heaved and sat up. The floor was ketchin' on fire from the lamp. But what I was most interested in was a window, in the wall to my right. I couldn't bust my feet loose from the floor-joist, but I squirmed and hunched myself along the floor to'rds that window.

I heard a yell and another scream, then two shots. 'Bout that time I got over onto my knees and pulled myself upright in front of the window. The fire was cracklin' behind me, but I strained to see what was goin' on outside.

I didn't see nothin' at first except the bright glow of moonlight all around. But suddenly I heard a familiar yip that seemed to come from the north, to my right. Then I seen a rider less'n two hundred yards away, comin' top gallop, and I knowed it was Jodie!

"Cheer up, pardner," I yelled to the dude. "We're gonna git rescued!"

There was shootin', and another scream from Miss Betty, and I made out the gal and the two crooks 'bout a hundred and fifty yards to my left. The crooks was holdin' the shuriff's sister in front of 'em for a shield, and was blazin' away at Jodie. Jodie couldn't shoot back for fear of hittin' the poor gal. But she was strugglin' and fightin' with the ruffians and doin' a good job of messin' up their shootin', 'cause Jodie kept comin' right at 'em, yellin' like a Comanche. And he was whirlin' his lasso-rope!

The crooks was tryin' to keep the gal in front of 'em, and also tryin' to run with her while they was blazin' away at Jodie. But all of a sudden they throwed her on the ground and lit out on a dead run. They was tryin' to make the arroyo, and they was spreadin' apart as they ran. But Jodie was less'n a hundred feet behind 'em. He let fly with his rope. He took one of the thugs around the chest, bindin' his arms to his sides, yankin' him off his feet and rollin' him like he was a dogie.

Instantly he stopped his bronc, less'n twenty feet from the other crook, who whirled and fired at him. But Jodie, with his sixgun in his left hand, blazed away, too. The crook fell. Jodie left his hoss and ran to Miss Betty. He whipped out his knife and cut the rope from her wrists. Together they come runnin' to the house.

By this time the fire was roarin' and Mr. Burgess and me was beginnin' to scorch and strangle. "Keep a stiff upper lip, pardner!" I yells. "We're gonna git saved now!" Then Jodie shot the padlock off the door and come bustin' in. Three

minutes later me and the dude feller was layin' on the cool ground outside, and the ropes was off our wrists and ankles.

The old log shack burned to the ground. Jodie rounded up the crooks and tied 'em together. They'd both been knocked plumb out—one from bein' rope-throwed and the other with a bullet in his leg. "I only aimed to hobble 'em," Jodie explained.

"Waal," says I, "Miss Crofut, meet up with my pardner, Jodie Blackburn. Jodie, meet the shuriff's sister!"

Miss Betty walked up to Jodie, put one arm around him and busted into tears. "I'm—I'm just tickled to death to meet you," she sobbed. "Oh, you poor dear, you're wounded!" Then she put both arms around him.

"The hombre I shot in the leg nicked me in the shoulder," said Jodie, puttin' an arm around her. "But 'tain't nothin' to worry about!"

"Mr. Blackburn," cried the dude, wringin' Jodie's hand, "you're a hero! You saved all our lives and captured two of the toughest criminals in the country!" And while we was walkin' back to the buckboard, carryin' the two crooks on Jodie's hoss, he said:

"I'm a Federal detective, working out of Denver. These thugs are counterfeiters and ex-convicts. They put out a lot of counterfeit currency in and around Denver. I got after them and trailed them to Eureka. When I arrived in Eureka this morning, Sheriff Crofut was away, but I met Miss Crofut and took her into my confidence, by reason of her being the sheriff's sister. Then I scouted around and discovered where the counterfeiters were hiding. Miss Crofut was eager to help me, so I let her drive me out the Eureka-Summit road in the buckboard this evening.

"She was supposed to return to town and tell no one but the sheriff what I was doing. I expected to surprise and capture these thugs, but they waylaid and slugged me while I was creeping up on the house. When I came to in the hide-out, I figured they'd made their getaway. They had horses hidden in one of these arroyos. Then they came back with Mr. Carberry and Miss Crofut. You know the rest, except that you three will get rewards totaling $10,000 for capturing these birds!"

"Gosh!" says I. "Miss Betty and me found two bundles of money in the arroyo. You mean all that money was just counterfeit cash?"

"Yes," says he, "just 'queer.' I'll come out tomorrow and get it—for evidence."

"Sam and me left the rest'rant in Eureka, headin' for Summit," said Jodie. "We didn't know who you was, Mr. Burgess, and Sam's partic'lar 'bout his sister goin' out ridin' with strangers. He knowed there was two crooks hidin' out somewheres around here, and he was wonderin' if she'd mebbe been kidnaped by one of 'em. He worries considerable 'bout his sister. So when we got almost to Summit, we separated. He went on north and I struck out east across the prairie. I went east 'bout a mile, then started back to'rds Eureka. I seen a light in that log shack and started for it. That's how I come to get in on the excitement."

GOIN' back to town, with Miss Betty ridin' my hoss 'longside of Jodie and me and Mr. Burgess in the buckboard with the two crim'nals, we was overtook by Shuriff Sam returnin' from up Summit way. When he'd had everythin' explained to him, he says to me:

"Pete," he says, "Betty's a big worry to me. She's always hornin' in on my chores, rammin' around and gittin' mixed up in matters pertainin' to lawr and order business. I'm proud of her, but it's a turrible handicap for a shuriff to have a sister like that. Would you do me a favor? Would you use your influence with Jodie and try and talk him into marryin' Betty and takin' her off my hands?"

"Shuriff," says I, "nothin' would please me better than to do same, bein' as I'm a willin' worker in the cause of Cupid. But any words I'd speak on the subject would be plumb superfloous! Look at 'em!"

Sam looked back up the road. They was standin' their hosses close together. Their arms was twined round each other and they was kissin'.

"If you ask me," says Mr. Burgess, "the sheriff's sister is a fast worker!"

Scotch . . . and . . . Irish

By L. Lindley Mulkey

The man was proud and fiery-tempered, and the girl proud and stubborn. Although their youthful hearts heard the call of love, neither Grant nor Maris would heed its message.

GRANT O'NEAL touched spurs to his roan and flashed into the thickening mass of cattle that milled about the river ford.

"Hi, Cliff! Cut out those three head of Bar S!"

The spring round-up on the Big Bend Reserve was in full swing. Riders from every spread within a radius of fifty miles combed the brakes and gullies of the high, rough country and shagged their findings into this cove between two ridges. Above the ground hung a fog of dust, through which April sunlight quivered like molten gold. From dawn till dark the place was bedlam, filled with the shouts of riders and the bawl of cattle. High-rising hills shed a scent of pine and balsam to mingle with the odors of dust, sweat, and saddle leather.

The work of cutting out various brands from the main herd went forward without pause. Here and there in debouching gullies the different outfits collected their cattle, keeping them segregated from the rest. It was the fifth day of the round-up, with mounts and men tried to the utmost.

Grant O'Neal, riding full tilt to head off a rangy steer, bent his lean body above the saddle horn. His face, under a mop of auburn hair, was streaked with sweat and dirt. Amber eyes, on either side of a straight, high-bridged nose, were red-rimmed from loss of sleep.

Suddenly, as he swung his horse back to the wing point between the Bar S and XIT cuts, his amber glance noted a lone rider on the far side of a gulch—a rider who took no part in the turmoil of round-up, but sat watching the activity in the cove with absorbed interest. There was the slenderness of youth about the straight form atop a spirited sorrel, and a certain showy grace in tilted Stetson, bright green

neckerchief, and concha-trimmed chaps.

"Huh, some dude visitor from the XIT," surmised Grant O'Neal, re-coiling his rope.

Then suddenly all else but the business in hand was forgotten. A group of riders came plunging down the opposite slope. As they reached the ford, a long-horned maverick let out a bawl of terror and broke for the open. A bunch of Bar S and some fifty head of XIT steers joined the rush. Pound of hoofs—shouts—dust—and the work of several hours was lost. As the dust cleared, Grant O'Neal found himself close to the lone watcher at the opening of the cove. A black anger stirred him at the other's passivity in the midst of grueling toil.

"What d'yuh think this is—a tea party?" he shouted grimly, bringing his horse to a sliding stop below the rim. "Why in hell didn't yuh head off those dogies?"

But if he expected a rise out of the spick and span rider on the sorrel, he was mistaken. For that individual paid not the slightest heed to his words. With Stetson tipped at debonair angle, and lips pursed in whistled melody, the rider continued a calm observation of the activity below.

That whistle was a maddening sound, coming in the midst of heat, dust and utter fatigue.

"Say, hombre," Grant addressed the other scathingly, "if yuh can't do anythin' but decorate that there knoll, suppose yuh move back to a reserved seat on the ridge, where yuh'll be out o' workin' folks' way?"

A clatter of hoofs came from behind and a moment later Cliff Dyer, a top-hand for the Bar S, pulled his bay to a stop beside O'Neal.

"Gosh, Grant!" Cliff's freckled face was a picture of concern. "Yuh can't talk like that!"

"Who said I couldn't?"

"But that's a gal! She's Maris Graham. She—"

"Maris Graham, eh?" spat Grant O'Neal in disgust. "Well, just because her old man left her half the Big Bend is no sign she can come to a round-up and clutter up the landscape like a wooden Indian!"

"But she owns Skull Springs, boss," Cliff pointed out. "Yuh've got to water there, if yuh use that south range this fall."

But Grant O'Neal was aroused to that pitch consistent with auburn hair and Irish ancestors. "I don't care if she owns heaven and earth and a slice o' hell!" With which declaration, he spurred forward and addressed himself directly to Maris Graham.

"What d'yuh mean, posin' there on that sorrel, right where yuh'll cause a riot with my cut? If yo're so set on hornin' in on a man's job, stay back out o' the way!"

As he finished, the girl turned in the saddle with an almost indolent grace. Wide blue eyes, shadowed by jet-black lashes, regarded Grant O'Neal with cool inquiry. The young rancher suddenly realized that here was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen; yet at the moment he was too mad to care.

"I asked yuh to please move over on the ridge out of the way," he repeated shortly.

"Oh, did you? I didn't hear the 'please' the first time." Maris Graham's tone was cool as mountain water.

O'Neal flushed under his tan. "I reckon that's why yuh refused to move, until yuh'd made me speak my piece like a good little boy!" he grated.

"Say, hombre," a boyish treble voice cut in, "yuh can't talk to my sister like that!"

Grant O'Neal turned to find a lad of about sixteen sitting taut and pale on the back of a fretful gelding. His cowboy attire of leather jacket and goatskin chaps seemed but to emphasize his immaturity.

"Never mind, Gavin," Maris Graham spoke quickly. "You run along and help the boys. I'll settle this matter with Mr. O'Neal."

A quick surprise flicked in Grant O'Neal's amber eyes. "H'm—yuh know me, then?"

"Of course. You're the hombre who bought the Bar S, lock, stock and barrel, four months ago." Maris Graham's words were a mere statement of fact; in her cool blue gaze was not the slightest interest. Somehow it angered Grant O'Neal the more.

"H'm—neighbors," he commented stiffly. "And I figured the Big Bend was a man's country."

A slow flush started at the rounded base of the girl's throat and mounted slowly upward.

"Yes, neighbors." And then a sudden flame showed in the blue eyes. "But not for long."

All about the two arose the din and clamor of round-up, but neither seemed to notice. It was as if they two stood on some high peak, isolated, alone.

"So yo're goin' away, eh?" Grant O'Neal's hard brown hands were deftly rolling a cigarette.

"No; the XIT's my stamping ground. I've managed it personally since my parents' death. What I meant was"—the girl paused as if to give her words added weight—"that a man with a hair-trigger Irish temper like yours wouldn't last long in the Big Bend."

If Maris Graham had slapped him, the effect would have been the same. Grant O'Neal's face drained white; amber eyes hardened to agate. But his voice was as level as the girl's when he spoke:

"So yuh don't think I'll last. I'd like to make a bet with yuh on that."

"Certainly."

ONeal flicked his cigarette away. "Skull Springs against my south section?"

"Skull Springs against your south section that you don't last six months."

Grant O'Neal's lips compressed. He'd bought the Bar S with a substantial down payment, and a mortgage that was due in six months. Four months of the time were already up. Did this girl know the terms of his contract? But of course. The Graham interests owned the Rock Ridge Bank, and the bank held the Bar S mortgage.

Six months. Maris Graham didn't think he'd make the grade! A dull fury burned within Grant O'Neal. A white line appeared along the line of his jaw, as he met her cool blue gaze.

"Done," he said levelly. "Irish temper against Scotch stubbornness."

For a long moment their glances held, mutually antagonistic, frankly challenging. Then, without further words, Grant O'Neal wheeled his roan and cantered back to the Bar S herd.

THE big XIT layout stretched for a distance of twenty miles on either side of the Clearwater, where the latter made its great mid-state bend. To the west lay the foothills of the Cascades, rising tier on tier until they merged with towering, snow-capped peaks. To the east rolled the Big Bend country, a land of short grass, sage and sand. It was in the late eighties that shrewd old Angus Graham had established the XIT—a time when beef prices were at bed-rock and land even lower. Coming north with a sizable fortune made in the California gold fields, he had invested the entire sum in land and stock.

Later, at the turn of the century, with prices on the rise, he had ridden to power and wealth with the times. With the unbounded energy of a dynamo, Angus Graham had expanded his holdings to take in the town-site of Rock Ridge, establish a bank, and build a railroad to tap the virgin empire of the Big Bend. And then, at the height of his power he had died, leaving the vast estate to sixteen-year-old Gavin and twenty-year-old Maris.

At first, there were those who predicted a dissolution of the great Graham interests. But they did not appreciate Angus Graham's ability at organization. Neither did they know Maris Graham. For Maris, lovely and as full of feminine grace as one of the slender tamaracks along the Clearwater, had inherited all her father's business sagacity. With the help of the Rock Ridge Bank, and Steed Furness, foreman for the XIT, she managed the Graham holdings with as steady a hand and sound a judgment as Angus Graham himself might have exercised.

Perhaps Angus had had some premonition of his death and had groomed Maris particularly for the responsibility she must assume. Certain it was that as soon as the girl was big enough to sit a horse, he made her his constant companion and confidant. She rode the wide miles of the XIT range with him; was present at the buying and selling of cattle; attended meetings of the bank and railway; and otherwise learned to feel the pulse of the great holdings which later she must manage alone.

The XIT range extended to the foot of

the Cascades, joining there the vast sweep of the Federal Reserve. To the north lay Grant O'Neal's Bar S spread, with Skull Springs, on which he must depend when using his south range, just within the XIT boundary line. Situated as it was, the spring was of little value to the XIT, but of utmost importance to the Bar S. The latter spread had always used Skull Springs when needed, and the owners made no objection. Yet if occasion arose, the XIT could clamp down on this water with an iron hand.

It was two days after Maris Graham's clash with Grant O'Neal at the round-up, that she rode her north range in the vicinity of Skull Springs. With the girl was Steed Furness, garbed in leather chaps and vest and mounted on a tall gray. The XIT foreman was of heavy build, with swarthy skin and bold black eyes that hinted at Mexican blood in his ancestry. As the two drew rein on a high promontory, his intent, dark gaze was upon Maris.

"So yuh bet this Grant O'Neal the spring against his south range!"

"Yes. I bet him he wouldn't last six months in the Big Bend." Suddenly there was a deepening color in the girl's oval cheeks. "That south range of his doesn't mean anything to me. We have more land now than we need. But somehow, Steed, I want to win that bet."

Steed Furness emitted a mirthless chuckle. "Don't worry, Maris. Yuh won't lose."

The girl's cool blue eyes swept away from a distant peak to concentrate on her foreman's face. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"Don't yuh always win?" Furness evaded. Then suddenly he leaned over and laid a blunt-fingered hand on hers. "Listen, Maris, when are yuh goin' to marry me? Yuh know yuh've got me roped and tied for life."

"Are you trying to rush me off my feet, Steed?" the girl smiled.

"No, but yuh need a man to help yuh in this job of handlin' the XIT."

"Perhaps," Maris conceded. "And there's no one else who knows the run of the ranch like you do, Steed. But there's years and years to be married in. Suppose we let the matter rest for a while."

For a brief moment a definite chagrin showed in Steed Furness' dark face. Swiftly his thoughts sought a reason for the girl's answer. Was she more interested in that O'Neal hombre than she pretended to be? As Maris turned her horse once more into the backward trail, the foreman's black eyes narrowed speculatively. Maris had put him off, but Steed Furness was not one to abandon a project once he'd set his mind to it.

IT was the middle of May that Grant O'Neal and Cliff Dyer drove the Bar S cut into Rock Ridge for shipment. Following a well defined trail that led through rolling hills, the herd of whitefaces plodded steadily toward the lower levels. Grant O'Neal drove by easy stages, in order to lose as little as possible on weight. None but he knew the importance of this present shipment. With prime beef selling at the lowest price in years, he would be pushed to the utmost to meet that Bar S mortgage when it fell due. And meet it he would—if it were humanly possible.

Heretofore it had been but a matter of saving or losing the Bar S; but since his clash with Maris Graham three weeks before, his ability to pay that mortgage had come to represent the measure of his manhood. She was so utterly sure he would fail, so sure the Graham interests would swallow him bodily! At the thought, O'Neal's hands gripped his reins as if the knuckles would burst the skin.

"Right nice bunch o' dogies," commented Cliff Dyer, swinging his mount close to that of his employer.

"Our best stuff."

O'Neal's amber glance flicked over the heaving backs of his herd with a pardonable pride. He experienced a definite regret at having to throw them on the market at this time, when a delay of six or eight months might show a raise in price. But no power under heaven would have made him ask the Rock Ridge Bank for an extension of that Bar S mortgage. In imagination, he could picture Maris Gra-

ham's satisfaction, as she voted with the other directors against renewal.

The sun hung high above the snow-capped Cascades as the Bar S herd entered the outskirts of Rock Ridge and was turned toward the shipping pens. Cliff attended to a final feeding of the stock, while Grant O'Neal rounded up the old yard engineer and superintended the switching of two empty stock cars onto a side-track. By late afternoon the Bar S cut was loaded, ready for the through freight which would hook onto the cars for the first lap of the long journey to market.

"We'll go over to that Chink café on Main Street and get a bite to eat," Grant O'Neal stated, as they finished work. "It'll only take a half-hour or so; then we can come back and wait for that train."

The café in question was a popular one, and it was some little time before the two riders' orders were filled. After they had finished eating, cigarettes delayed their return to the loaded stock cars still further.

"Reckon we'd better amble along," Grant O'Neal said finally, pushing back his chair and reaching for the wide Stetson which hung above the table.

A moment later the two were outside and walking toward the railroad. All at once O'Neal's hand clutched his companion's arm.

"Look, Cliff! That red flare above the trees!"

"Fire! And close to the tracks!" Cliff Dyer exclaimed.

With a common accord the two struck out at a run. Spurs clinked against stones, high-heeled boots retarded their progress. Rounding a corner, they could see red-tongued flames leaping from a warehouse—a warehouse belonging to the Graham interests and used at certain seasons of the year for storage. At present it was empty.

"Goss, boss," breathed Cliff Dyer, "those stock cars—yore spring cut—"

Grant O'Neal's face, lighted by the flame's red flare, was set in granite lines. The breath in his throat rasped like the wind in a pair of giant bellows.

"We've got one chance," he grated. "The switch engine!"

"But, boss, that engineer—"

"We don't need him. Steam's up, and I know something about locomotives."

His words were drowned by the roar and crackle of flames. Rising high above this was the pitiful bawling of the imprisoned stock, as the heat became unbearable. It was only a matter of minutes until the cars, standing so close to the blazing structure, must also ignite.

The two riders had reached the switch engine, some two hundred feet down the track. With a leap, Grant O'Neal was in the cab, moving levers with quick, sure hands.

"More coal, Cliff!" he shouted, with a swift glance at the steam gauge.

Almost instantly they were moving, backing swiftly toward the loaded stock cars. The heat was stifling. Thick rolls of smoke swept down from above and blotted out all sight. And then a thudding bump appraised Grant O'Neal that they had reached the cars. With a rush he was out of the cab and feeling his way along the tender.

To Cliff Dyer, alone in the cab, the passing seconds were eternities. Blackness and an intolerable heat shut him in. Suddenly Grant O'Neal was back, feeling for the throttle.

"Coupled 'em!" he shouted above the din, and in his voice was a throbbing exultation.

Again they were moving, with the air getting cooler and clearer. And then, some two miles down the track, where a high hill cut off all view of the fire, Grant O'Neal brought the engine to a grinding stop and stumbled from the cab.

THE XIT ranch buildings stood on a high bluff, where the current of the Clearwater was divided by a long, wedge-like island. All year the grass on Willow Island was lush and green, subirrigated by river seepage and warmed by a golden sun. Amid the gray and dun of the surrounding range, it lay like a lovely emerald on the river's mirror-like breast. Old Angus Graham had early found that yearlings,

fattened on the island, brought the highest prices; during almost any month of the year, one might see choice herds of the XIT whitefaces grazing there.

In order to facilitate the movement of stock to and from the island, the shrewd old Scot had built a ferry, with a landing a short distance below the ranch buildings. The current floated the barge, which was moored by pulleys to an overhead cable, running from the river bank to the island.

In the cool dusk of a mid-May evening, Maris Graham sat in a deep rocker on the veranda of the XIT ranch house. Dressed in a frock of misty rose, the girl possessed an almost ethereal beauty. Jet-black hair waved close to her small head like a shining helmet; dark brows and lashes were in direct contrast to the white transparency of her skin. Maris' blue eyes were lovely as fringed gentians, as they dreamed on the far horizon of snow-capped Cascades; her slim, browned hands were folded lightly above a bit of sewing, like two resting birds.

Below the veranda, a green sweep of lawn fell away toward a rose arbor at the edge of the yard. Beyond this was a long hitch-rack and, still farther on, the big, peeled-pole corrals where the XIT riders were unsaddling after a long day on the range. Maris loved such an evening, with the sunset gilding the high peaks in golden light and with the scent of sage permeating the dusk like subtle perfume. More than ever it made her realize that here was her life; never could she be happy in any setting other than that of the range. As Gavin grew older he might go away to other interests and other work, but she herself would always be a part of the West and the XIT.

All at once the girl sat erect, aware of a disturbance at the big corral. A plunging rider had drawn rein there, then suddenly spurred on toward the yard gate. Maris rose and went to stand beside one of the big porch columns. It was not until the rider had flung off his horse at the hitch-rack and was striding up the gravel path that the girl recognized him.

"Grant O'Neal!" she spoke incredulously.

But what a Grant O'Neal! His face was streaked with smoke and grime; hair and eyebrows were singed close. But in the man's amber eyes, as they met hers, was a steady, challenging light.

"So that's the way yuh fight to win a bet!"

The words were flung out like bullets as O'Neal came to a stop at the foot of the steps.

The girl's slender form stiffened. "What do you mean?" she asked evenly.

"I mean that I never saw a woman yet who wouldn't cheat to gain her point. And yo're no exception to the rule!"

Maris' face suddenly went livid. One hand reached out to catch the veranda railing.

"Suppose you explain."

"Explain!" Grant O'Neal's laugh was devoid of mirth. "So yuh can crawfish out of the mess, eh?"

"I don't understand what you're talking about."

"Huh!" spat O'Neal. "I reckon yuh don't know anythin' about that warehouse fire, nor that my spring cut was loaded, ready for shipment on the sidin'! I reckon yuh don't even know I was dependin' on the money from that beef to meet the Bar S mortgage!" With scathing contempt Grant O'Neal told of his battle to save his stock—a battle that might have meant his and Cliff Dyer's lives.

For a full minute after he had finished, Maris Graham stared at him. Her blue eyes were wide in the white mask of her face.

"And—and you thought I was behind that?" she finally managed in muffled voice.

"Who else?" flung out Grant O'Neal from the depth of his bitterness.

Again there was an electric silence, broken at last by the sound of footsteps nearby. Grant O'Neal tore his gaze from that of Maris Graham and saw her young brother, Gavin, crossing the yard.

"Gavin!" spoke Maris with sudden decision. "Go down to the corral, please, and tell Steed Furness to come here."

A few moments later, the yard gate slammed and the XIT foreman, dressed in range working clothes of high boots and

whipcords, strode to the foot of the steps.

"Yuh wanted to see me, Maris?" he asked, after a brief nod to Grant O'Neal.

"What about that fire this afternoon?" the girl flung at him.

A furtive grin crossed Steed Furness' heavy lips. "What fire?" he asked deliberately.

"You know what fire! The one that burned the warehouse in Rock Ridge!"

"Oh, that!" Plainly the foreman was sparring for time.

A surge of crimson suffused the girl's face. "What do you mean, Steed Furness, by employing such a method as that?" she flamed.

"Huh, yuh wanted to win that bet, didn't yuh?" grunted Furness.

"Not that way—and you know it!" The girl's slender form was trembling as if swept by an inner tempest. "This man thinks I had the planning of that fire. Tell him whether I did or not."

Furness turned pale eyes to Grant O'Neal. "She didn't have anythin' to do with it," he snarled. "Yuh were a fool to think that!"

"And now, Steed Furness," cut in Maris, "get your things from the bunkhouse and go!"

"Yuh mean—yuh mean yo're turnin' me off?"

"I mean just that!" Maris' blue eyes blazed in the beautiful oval of her face. "You're through on the XIT."

For a full minute it seemed as if Furness couldn't believe Maris meant what she said. Then all at once his heavy face became congested—mottled red and white in the intensity of his rage.

"Through on the XIT, eh?" he snarled, thick lips drawn back to show long, uneven teeth. "Don't be too sure about that!"

A moment later he turned and flung himself out the yard gate. At his going, Grant O'Neal mounted the steps toward the girl. There was a sudden dryness in his throat; a throbbing pulse beat in his temples.

"I reckon I owe yuh an apology," he said thickly. "I should have known—"

"Don't bother to apologize!" Maris, slender and utterly feminine, was trembling. But the lovely lips were set in a straight line. "And now will you go, too? I never want to see you again."

A moment later, she whirled like a small cyclone and ran into the house.

FOR the following three weeks Maris Graham had her wish. A hundred duties tied Grant O'Neal to the Bar S—spring branding, fence-building, the cutting of wild hay. A closed season was in force on the reserve, so that the entire Bar S herd was held on the home range. After a period of six weeks, the reserve would again be thrown open for summer grazing.

Warm south winds were melting the snow in the upper levels, swelling lakes and streams bank-full and pouring a steady flood into the Clearwater. The river was boiling between basalt cliffs with the peak of June high water. Yet the Clearwater's rise affected Grant O'Neal but little. His Bar S lay higher, away from possible floods. This year, however, the stream was undergoing an unprecedented rise, due to unusually heavy snows in the Cascades. Bits of news found their way to the Bar S, brought by grub-liners or overheard at the post office in Rock Ridge.

"Seems like they don't hold much hope for the Canyon bridge," Cliff informed Grant, after a trip to town for the mail. "The water's lappin' the approaches now, and still raisin'."

O'Neal, busy mending a saddle at the corral gate, clenched another rivet and inspected his work with critical eye.

"H'm—if the bridge goes out, it'll dam that Canyon cut and play hob all along the line," he observed.

"Yo're sayin' it!" Cliff, leading his tired mount, disappeared into the shadowy interior of the barn.

Left alone, Grant O'Neal returned to his task. His hard brown hands worked the leather-punch with the deftness of long practise.

And then, all at once, there came the sound of pounding hoofs rounding the turn below the barn. A moment later a rider, bent low on a swiftly running sorrel, swept through the open Bar S gate and

made straight for the corral. Grant O'Neal laid aside his work with a certain deliberateness and got to his feet. Standing there, lean and hard in the afternoon sunlight, he somehow gave the impression of steel springs held in leash. As the rider jerked the sorrel to a stop, O'Neal's breath was sucked in sharply. Maris Graham!

"I—I had to come." Fatigue caught at the girl's voice. "I had to see you." She stood beside her horse, slender as a boy in the revealing snugness of whipcords and high-laced boots.

"H'm—seems like the last time we met," returned the young rancher dryly, "yuh were hopin' yuh'd never have to do that again."

"Please, won't you forget that now?" The girl's blue eyes were dark with a nameless fear. "I—I had to come to you. It's about Gavin. He's over on Willow Island with a bunch of feeders."

"But what—"

"He can't get back. The Canyon bridge is out—the river's backing up. I—I'm afraid!"

Grant O'Neal straightened, muscles taut. "Yore ferry—it'll ride the flood."

"The ferry's gone! Someone, apparently knowing Gavin was on the island, cut the moorings that held it to the cable."

"Huh—some of Steed Furness' work, I reckon."

"Perhaps." The girl's lips moved stiffly. "But that's beside the point now. Gavin's in danger—terrible danger. Willow Island will be completely covered in another two hours, and the river's like a mill-race. I—I came to you."

"But why me?" The words fell from Grant O'Neal's lips slowly, coldly.

"I want you to go," the girl answered, as from a great distance. "Save him; he's all I have left."

"But yore own men?"

"They're afraid. They swear no man can make it."

"They're right. It's plain suicide."

The girl's slender form jerked erect. A flame leaped in the depths of her eyes. "I'll pay twenty thousand—cash."

"Yo're crazy!"

"Twenty-five thousand!"

Grant O'Neal's intent, amber eyes strove to read her face. For a long moment they stood, these two, with antagonism flaming between them.

"I'll go," the man clipped and turned to lay his loop on a tall roan within the corral.

With an inarticulate nod, Maris Graham once more pulled herself onto her sorrel.

High overhead a golden June sun burned with mid-summer warmth. The rolling hills of the Big Bend were covered with a pale green carpet, already turning dun-colored on the more exposed slopes. Pushing their mounts to utmost speed, Maris Graham and Grant O'Neal followed a deep-cut trail. The two rode in silence—the man grim-faced, the girl white and spent with a fear more wearing than fatigue.

As the two came within sight of the XIT buildings, it required but a glance to see that no one was about. And then they topped a rise that overlooked the swelling flood of the Clearwater. A silent group of XIT riders were gathered above the ferry landing.

The roar of angry waters filled the air and beat against the ear-drums with terrifying monotony. The flood tore at the steep banks with curling, clutching fingers. There was no sign of the flat-bottomed ferry; only the high cable remained, extending out over the water like a fragile thread. All these things Grant O'Neal's gaze embraced, and then passed on to mid-river where the green length of Willow Island was more than three-fourths submerged.

At its lower end, which stood slightly higher than the rest, could be seen a huddled group of cattle, their frantic bawling rising above the water's roar. There also, atop a boulder, was outlined the slight, boyish figure of Gavin Graham—waiting.

"She's still risin', miss." A grizzled rider had left the group near the landing and approached Maris.

"How much?"

"Four feet higher than when yuh left."

The girl's white teeth caught her underlip until a drop of blood appeared there. "You'll try?" she asked huskily, turning to Grant O'Neal.

But the latter seemed not to hear. His

amber glance was questing the surface of the swollen river—measuring, weighing.

Suddenly it stopped, to fasten intently on the high cable that stretched from the ferry landing to the island. There, dangling from the nearer end, hung the pulley which had held the ferry moorings.

"Say, hombre," spoke the XIT rider, crowding close, "yuh ain't aimin' to swim that current, are yuh? No hoss—"

"Quick!" Grant O'Neal swung around. "Have yuh another length of cable about the ranch?"

"No more cable," the man answered regretfully.

"A heavy rope then—the strongest yuh can find!"

Grant O'Neal spurred his roan down the slope and flung himself off at the water's edge. With quick, hard hands he tested the cable fastenings, finding them secure.

"We'll have to gamble on the island end," he spoke, half to himself. "Under water—but maybe they've held."

By this time the XIT rider was back, carrying a coil of rope. With swift hands O'Neal looped one end about the body of his roan, just forward of the saddle and back of the forelegs.

"Here, take the other end," he directed shortly, shoving the coil into the waddy's hands, "and run it through the ferry pulley."

Tying the rope about his waist, the man climbed the big rock that anchored the cable. Working himself out, hand over hand, to where the pulley dangled, he did as Grant O'Neal had directed. A moment later he dropped lightly to the ground and once more handed the rope to O'Neal.

"Gosh—a livin' ferry!" someone muttered softly, as the young rancher made another loop about the body of his roan. "He's got about one chance in a million."

Grant O'Neal swung into the saddle, face set, eyes fixed ahead.

"Wait!" The cry was wrung from Maris Graham as if icy hands squeezed at her throat.

But O'Neal seemed not to hear. With roweling spurs, he forced the roan into the flood. The current caught horse and rider with a sweep, snapping the ropes tight. Desperately the roan strove to keep his head above water, but both horse and rider were borne under. As they broke the surface, the roan struck out valiantly, with the cable holding him against the current's drag. Slowly the pulley moved along the overhead line, then faster as the swift-moving water of mid-stream claimed horse and rider.

Bawl of frantic cattle—roar of water! Yet, overlaying these sounds, there seemed a breathless silence. The XIT outfit on the river bank stood tense, utterly voiceless. On the tiny promontory of Willow Island, Gavin Graham waited as if turned to stone. Minutes became eternities, ticking slowly away to be lost in the surge of the flood. And then, all at once, the watchers breathed more easily, as horse and rider found footing on the submerged island and floundered through shallower water.

Yet the perilous venture was only half done. The return trip must be made, with the winded roan carrying double. Weathered riders, who had known the river and its ways for the greater part of their lives, shook their heads. There were limits to human and animal endurance.

And now Grant O'Neal had reached Gavin. Quickly the two readjusted the rope about the roan. And then the horse was headed once more into the flood. Once more the current caught them in its clutching grip. If one of those ropes should break, all must be swept to certain death. Suddenly the watchers saw Grant O'Neal slip into the water and cling to the saddle horn. The lessened burden seemed to instil new courage into the roan. Valiantly he swam, nose barely above the surging crest. Gavin, white with boyish terror, clung to the animal's back like a burr. The pulley seemed to creep with maddening slowness along the cable. The great rock which anchored it on the island was completely under water. Would it hold? Again the minutes stretched into eternities.

Beside her horse stood Maris Graham, slender form tense as a bow string. All at once a cry of terror escaped her lips. A movement upstream had caught her eye. There, bearing down directly upon the

struggling forms of Grant O'Neal and her brother, was a huge, uprooted tree-trunk. It rode the surging flood silently with one high prong thrust skyward. In those sinister outlines was certain disaster. Once it struck the weakened cable, no power under heaven could save the men and valiant roan.

With the speed of desperation, Maris' brain awoke. Leaping into her saddle, she sank spurs to flanks. The sorrel responded like a mad thing, racing upstream along the river bank. The girl's slim hands were already working at the coiled rope which every rider carries at the saddle horn.

Her right arm swung up in a measured, circular sweep. And then the loop hissed out, across the boiling flood. One moment it wavered sickeningly, then dropped over the upthrust prong. Instantly Maris' mount, trained to work on the range, threw its weight against the rope, snapping it taut and holding the great snag from further progress. A moment it swung in the current, then drifted in to the bank and found lodgment there.

It had happened in the space of a second; yet, as Maris left her mount and ran back along the bank, it seemed as if countless ages had passed. A great weakness tugged at her body; her breath came in laboring gasps. And then all at once she experienced the reaction of relief. There, beside the old ferry landing, Grant O'Neal was dragging Gavin from the water. A moment later the roan climbed the bank, to stand head down and utterly spent.

"Gavin!" Maris' voice was scarcely more than a whisper.

But already two XIT hands were leading the boy toward the house. Maris swung round to confront Grant O'Neal, where he stood, wet and disheveled, beside the roan.

"You—you did it!" The girl came close, white face lifted, blue eyes wide and dark with an unreadable light. And then one small brown hand tugged at the pocket of her blouse. A moment and she was extending a slip of paper toward O'Neal.

"My—my check—in payment."

"Thanks." The word was flat, toneless. Suddenly Grant O'Neal took the check, tore it into bits and flung them at her feet.

"Payment!" His voice was harsh, bitter. Then, with a swift movement, he reached out and caught her in a crushing embrace.

Maris felt the wetness of his clothes seeping through her own. His lips bruised hers in a long, savage kiss. For a moment she was rigid in his arms, then all at once relaxed.

"That's my pay!" O'Neal said, releasing her roughly. "Yuh don't owe me anythin' more. And it might interest yuh to know that I don't owe you anythin', either."

"You—you mean the Bar S mortgage?"

"Yes. I paid it yesterday at the Rock Ridge Bank. What's more, it's the end of the six months and I'm still in the Big Bend."

"So Skull Springs is yours," Maris said softly. "I—I'm glad, Grant."

A swift incredulity dawned in Grant O'Neal's face. "Glad? Yuh—yuh mean—"

"You're so blind!" Maris whispered, coming close. Her eyes were no longer cool, but shining with an inner light. "Oh, Grant, we've let all these precious weeks pass, with your Irish temper and my Scotch stubbornness keeping us apart!"

"Maris!"

The bitterness in Grant O'Neal's voice was changed to exultation. And this time, when he kissed her, his lips were infinitely gentle.

Joe had thought her a quitter because she wore frilly dresses and curled her hair when disaster was overtaking her father's ranch. Yet he couldn't resist the lure of her loveliness, nor refuse to recognize that nameless bond which bound them.

By Herbert A. Woodbury

Heartbreak Ranch

JOE DUNCAN, foreman of the Circle M-Lazy Y, stood there in the softness of the valley's twilight, unsaddling the bay pony which he'd just ridden in. He didn't hear the footsteps which presently approached. But he heard the girl's voice, soft and silvery, "What's the verdict, Joe?"

At the sound of it, he turned abruptly from the tall, sleek bay to look into the face of Tess Cameron, his employer's daughter. And the same thing happened to him which had been happening upon every occasion in the past month when her blue eyes had met his. He felt the roof of his mouth go dry. An inexplicable tremor ran through his broad, capable shoulders.

Joe swallowed a little breathlessly. "The verdict, Tess?" He looked at the bay pony. "Why, I'll tell you," he said. "I had him round the fair grounds track twice. But he wouldn't run no better'n he was runnin' six months ago, when we decided to turn him out to pasture and let him rest."

The girl nodded. She looked tall and slim, fresh and cool in a long white dress with ruffles and bows and ribbons. "I see," she said. "You mean, in other words, that there's no hope of racing him at the fair in two weeks? He's turned out to be a quitter?" Her blue eyes were level, direct.

Joe colored at something in their glance; felt somehow angry. The bay pony, Ranger, *had* turned out to be a quitter, indeed. Six months before, Ranger had been doing his part to save Tess' father's ranch from bankruptcy. He'd been making the rounds of the nearby fairs, the *paradas* and the rodeos, picking up enough prize money to ease the burden of interest payments under which the Circle M-Lazy Y staggered. And then he'd gone to pieces; laid down on the job. A quitter, indeed! But a lot of right Tess had to accuse anybody of being a quitter! Joe had the sudden desire to seize her by her slim little shoulders and shake her.

His dark eyes held hers resentfully. Tess' own story was every bit as disgraceful as Ranger's. She, too, had tried for a little while to save the ranch from ruin. And then she, too, had given up!

A year ago, when her father's financial affairs had first commenced to grow tangled, Tess Cameron had come home from her fashionable girls' school in St. Louis, had put on gingham aprons, and had settled down to work. But, like Ranger, she hadn't been able to stand the gaff! She, too, had broken under the strain; folded up; laid down!

Look at her today in her frills and her ribbons! Her golden hair curled in water waves! A month ago, she'd given up her chores, her duties about the ranch, and had become a lady of leisure. She spent her afternoons, now, sitting in a hammock on the porch, drinking lemonade with Rod Torres, with Bill Mason, with Pete Stiles and the rest of a group of idle, good-for-nothing young friends who came out from Red Lake to call on her. She spent her evenings dancing, while her younger brother and sister worked late with the stock. Quitter? *She* had the presumption to seem scornful of Ranger?

Her voice cut through his reverie. "I asked you, Joe. Ranger's quit on us for good? There's no chance of his winning anything at the fair?"

He shook his head. "Not a chance in the world."

She smiled. "Thanks, Joe. I—I just wanted to know."

Then she turned; left him. His eyes followed her, held by her loveliness in spite of himself, as she walked lithely, erectly off up the path toward the house. Again he felt something, best described as a sort of ache, flood through him. She was so beautiful! She had no right to be so beautiful, and be, at the same time, so worthless! Didn't she care what happened to her father and her younger brother and sister these days, just so long as she had pretty dresses and plenty of beaux, and could go dancing every night?

He watched her as she mounted the veranda steps; saw her walk over and say something to an under-sized, dark-haired, dark-eyed young man in dapper city clothes. Then he saw the young man rise, pick up a huge, gaudy silver beaver hat from a table and put it on his head. The dapper little individual took Tess' arm; the two of them came back down the steps and walked over to a brightly painted runabout with rubber-tired, bicycle wheels.

The man helped Tess into the seat, went around to the other side and climbed in after her. He plucked a whip from the dash socket, flicked it over the back of a long, rangy, Hambletonian-bred roan mare. Then they were off—Tess and Rod Torres.

Joe's fists clenched; he took an instinctive, involuntary step after the departing pair. He wanted suddenly to pursue them, to seize Rod Torres by the scruff of his worthless neck, yank him off the seat of the runabout and punch his nose. He didn't know why. He wasn't jealous, because you had to be in love with a girl to be jealous of her. And all he felt toward Tess, these days, was scorn.

It was simply, he guessed, that he hated and always had hated Rod Torres. Rod, of all the young men who were giving Tess such a rush lately, was the most worthless. A Mexican! Only half Mexican, perhaps; he'd had a Yankee mother. But

Rod had inherited few of his mother's qualities. Rodriguez Torres was a bounder, an utter rotter. He owned a not particularly respectable saloon and gambling house in Red Lake and another over in Clearwater. She'd descended pretty low, Tess, when, in her wild craving to get away from the hard work of the ranch, she let a man like Rod Torres take her out.

Finally he turned back to Ranger and his chores. What Tess did was none of his affair, he guessed. His job here was to do more and more work around the ranch, these days, so that they could discharge men and cut down on the payroll. He still knew the meaning of responsibility, even if the girl and Ranger didn't.

He finished unsaddling Ranger; led him by the forelock down to the corrals. Then, as Ranger knelt and rolled, he made his way to the smaller, stouter stockade nearby where they kept Wildfire. And as always Joe's eyes grew grave as he tossed hay over the high posts to the fiery stallion inside.

Ranger's story, Tess' story were sad. But Wildfire's, in a way, was sadder still. Five years before, in his palmier days, John Cameron had had two brood mares sired by Great Dominei, a stallion famous from one end of the Western circuits to the other. The mares, a few days apart, had foaled Ranger and Wildfire, and the two half-brothers had grown up seeming to combine the best qualities of their pure-bred father and their steel-dust dams. But they'd each fallen down on the promise they'd displayed as colts.

Ranger had won a few races and then lost his heart. Wildfire had never even gone to the post, never even been broken. He'd killed the first man who'd mounted astride of him; he'd crippled two others, condemned a third to a year in a plaster cast. And they kept him here now, simply because no one would buy him and because John Cameron was loath to shoot him. "He's so beautiful," John Cameron said sometimes, "I haven't the heart to put him out of the way."

"And she's so beautiful," Joe thought, tonight. "I—oh—gosh, I couldn't be in love with her, could I?"

He finished his chores toward darkness, wandered down to the mess room in the bunkhouse for a cold and belated supper. He played stud with the handful of riders left in the great, empty building until eleven. Then, when the loss of a dozen hands in succession showed him that his mind wasn't and somehow couldn't be on the game, he turned in.

HE didn't go to sleep. He was awake at one or two or whenever it was when the sharp, staccato trot of Rod's roan and the purr of his runabout's bicycle wheels sounded in the pepper lane. He heard Rod and Tess come in; he heard Rod drive off again. And then he heard —it sounded to him for a second as if he heard a girl weeping. Tess? Crying?

He vaulted out of bed; slipped into shirt, blue jeans and boots. Five minutes later, he mounted the veranda steps, and found her, sitting there in the porch hammock.

She heard his step, looked up; he saw her spring to her feet. And there in the soft tawniness of the moonlight which filtered through the wisteria vine, she looked suddenly very tiny and pitiful. He felt his resentment toward her flow out of him. "Tess," he cried huskily. He took a quick step toward her, caught her in his arms before he quite knew what he was doing.

For a second, she seemed to melt, there in his embrace. Her golden head came to rest on his shoulder. "Tess," he begged her, "tell me. Did Rod say anythin' to you, tonight? Did—did he try to treat you, maybe, like you was one of them dance-hall girls he runs around with?" His voice trailed off. "Tess, if you want me to follow him back to town and beat the daylights out of him—"

She stiffened, there in his arms, broke suddenly free of him. "It's not that," she said. "It's—I—it's nothing, Joe. If I was crying, it's just because I'm happy, I reckon. Rod proposed to me, tonight."

"Rod what?" He went suddenly cold.

"Asked me to marry him. I—I'm marrying Rod, next month!"

He simply stood there. He was trembling with rage, and couldn't help it.

"Tess!" he cried. "You're *not* marryin' him! Please!" Usually tongue-tied in her presence, he found himself speaking rapidly, now. "I love you so terribly. I've aways loved you, since I first came here to work." He'd never said this before, even to himself. In fact, up until a few moments ago, he'd been sure that he hated her.

He didn't hate her, now. Quitter? What did it matter? She was a girl. And it must have been hard for her to slave, to work endlessly, day after day, and never go any place. "Tess," he begged her, "that's not true. You're jokin'. You're—"

She'd backed away from him. "I'm marrying Rod Torres, next month," she said. She flounced about, turned her back upon him, fled toward the door of the house and went inside.

He didn't follow her. An eternity passed; then he turned and walked back to the bunkhouse. Rod Torres! But she was mad! She knew the stories they told about Rod as well as anyone. She must. He didn't understand; couldn't.

He understood, the next day. The following afternoon, a half-dozen Mexican vaqueros rode up to the ranch with a trail herd. Beef—John Cameron explained to him—which Rod Torres had been pasturing on the land of an uncle. But Rod had —um—er—John Cameron flushed embarrassedly—Rod had grown dissatisfied with the care his uncle was giving the herd. Rod was moving his cattle to the Circle M-Lazy Y.

And there'd be a good, fat grazing fee in it, enough to make up for the prize money they couldn't expect, this year, at Red Lake. It wouldn't matter now whether Ranger won them any purses at the county fair, or not. Rod was paying his grazing fee in advance, and they'd squeak through the interest payment due in June.

Oh, Joe understood, all right. Clairvoyance dawned, blindingly. He wondered how he could have been so simple, so stupid as not to have understood before. Those new clothes—that bewitching curl in her golden hair—her dates—her numerous beaux! There'd been a purpose in them. She hadn't rebelled at her drudgery; set out on a wild orgy of meaningless pleasure!

She'd made herself softly, femininely attractive and beautiful in the hope of winning—well, not Rod Torres, necessarily. Pete Stiles or Bill Mason would have done just as well, probably—any rich husband who'd have come to the aid of the ranch. Only, Bill and Pete had never, somehow, gotten round to proposing. And Rod had! So she'd accepted Rod! And he'd called her a quitter! Compared her to Ranger!

He must have made some answer to John Cameron, Joe recalled later. But what he said to the man, he didn't remember. He found himself a while later, down by the bunkhouse, smoking a cigarette which had burned almost to his fingertips. He felt weak, weary, as if he'd just awakened from a long, drugged sleep.

She'd come to him yesterday and had asked him what Ranger's chances were in the coming county fair at Red Lake! She'd said to him, not in so many words, but in effect, "Joe, please tell me. Do I have to marry Rod to save the ranch for Dad and the kids? Or isn't there a hope, maybe, that Ranger will snap to and do his part, and that I won't have to go through with this thing?"

And he, blind utterly, had told her that she'd have to marry Rod! *He'd* driven her into this, when he might have saved her, for a little while, at least, by lying to her.

That same afternoon, Joe, taking two punchers with him, walked over to the tiny, stout little stockade where Wildfire was kept. Joe scrambled up the high fence, circled the noose of his rope once round his head, and made a flying cast for the outlaw's great, arched, brown neck.

His loop settled, and he dropped down outside the rawhide-laced posts. Then the three of them pulled and tugged and burned their hands on the rope while the stallion inside the enclosure reared and fought and bit at the rope and threw himself.

They pulled him up close to the fence, snubbed him there, finally, but only after one rope had snapped, worn through by friction against a post, and a fresh rope had bitten deeply enough into the stallion's neck to choke off his wind-pipe. They were forced to half kill Wildfire,

first. They let him drop, screaming, gasping for breath. Then, after he'd lain there till his great hind legs ceased to thrash, till his very muscles seemed on the point of ceasing to quiver, they slackened the noose and let him up. And as he lurched drunkenly, reelingly to his feet, they managed to drag him to the fence.

Joe reached gingerly through the posts to adjust a second rope round the horse's neck—one with a snap and a buckle, this time, which wouldn't draw chokingly tight. He looped it on up over the outlaw's muzzle, drew it down with a hackamore twist across the nose. The loose end he brought through his side of the fence, and tied tightly. Then, Wildfire snubbed with this second rope, he cast off his lariat.

But the lariat came into play again when they entered the stockade. Bill Grimes, one of the two punchers with Joe, took the rope and hind-footed the stallion. They dragged that rope out, across the stockade, looped it round a far post, and pulled till they'd thrown Wildfire to his haunches. Then they were ready to commence saddling. Over the improvised hackamore of looped rope, Joe slipped a real hackamore of rawhide, tightly wound round leather, and shellacked to hardness. Bill Grimes helped him with blankets and saddle and cinches. And he finally climbed aboard Wildfire, while the beast still lay half prostrate.

He took the hackamore reins in his left hand. Then Bill opened the gate, and came back to slacken the noose which still held Wildfire's rear feet. His other companion went outside, to unsnub the rope-improvised hackamore.

And a moment later Wildfire, who'd been half sitting down on his haunches, like a cat or a dog, lurched to his feet. He simply stood there a second, snorting, breathing deeply, breathing fire. Then a tremor eddied along his spine. He reared straight into the air. He didn't quite fall backward; he didn't drive the pommel through Joe's stomach or break his back with the cantle. He fell more to the side.

Joe found himself still in the saddle, one leg aching, but the ball of its foot still in the stirrup's wooden ring. And then they were off like a shot, like an arrow, for the gate of the stockade. The outlaw nicked him but didn't crush him against a post as they went through. They came out into the open of the ranch yard, and Wildfire charged straight for a barbed-wire fence.

Joe tightened the hackamore reins futilely and in vain. The outlaw plunged on—and on. The fence loomed up, and Joe, too stupefied to try to swing free, braced himself for a crash. It didn't come. Wildfire saw the almost invisible strands of wire at the last second, and, without faltering in his stride for an instant, leaped the barrier.

They raced off, pell-mell, like the wind, across the desert. And never, it seemed to Joe, had horseflesh taken him faster. Never had he been quite so close to sheer gliding, to flying. He tingled. It was to be as easy as all this, was it? Wildfire, after his one attempt to unseat him, was simply going to run and run?

As the landscape blurred past, he let himself halfway relax. It hadn't been such a wild stunt, this idea of his, after all. He'd break Wildfire easily at this rate, have a good ten days to train him to the post. And then, at Red Lake, with Wildfire's flashing, blinding speed beneath him, he'd—

The thought was clipped. Wildfire had ceased his running; he pitched once as he slowed up, and then commenced to buck. And instantly Joe had a glimmering of what was to come next. He'd ridden broncs before. He'd even considered himself good enough, once, to enter the exhibition lists at Red Lake. But he'd never, he knew the instant Wildfire came down stiff-legged, encountered anything like this before. The beast's descent seemed to drive his spine upward through his neck. His head snapped drunkenly. And then it happened again and again!

Wildfire had no especial bag of tricks, apparently. He bucked, and he did nothing but buck. But Joe's head had remained clear aboard far fancier and flashier pinwheelers and sunfishers. Sheer nausea attacked him as the terrific pounding continued. He felt weak, sick at his stomach;

his whole insides were getting mixed up and out of place. His kidneys ached; he had a stitch in his side.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw them racing toward him, Bill Grimes and his companion. But he couldn't wait for them. Couldn't— He realized drunkenly that he'd lost a stirrup. He seized the pommel, pulled leather desperately. Then the shoulders of the saddle struck him violently in the stomach, and he was booted off into mid-air. The ground flew up to meet him; he did a crazy somersault, went clear up on his head and flopped over. And then he saw Wildfire coming toward him, head down, nostrils snorting, teeth bared.

WHAT happened, after that, he had to be told when he returned to consciousness, back at the bunkhouse. Bill had arrived, it developed, just in time to rope the stallion off before it could rear and strike. Neither the outlaw's teeth nor his hoofs had touched him. But they'd picked him up, senseless from his licking in the saddle, just the same. Doc Reyerson from Red Lake was there, and the doctor told him that if no internal hemorrhages developed, he'd escaped with two cracked ribs. The doctor forbade him to ride again —to ride anything—for three weeks.

But the next day he was out there again, his ribs taped, his middle bound round with a veritable corset of a bucking belt. Tess came down to the bunkhouse to call upon him that night; said that she wanted to talk to him, and led him outdoors. They walked off into the fragrance of the rose garden, and sat down. And Tess said to him, "You've got to stop it, Joe. It's foolhardy in the first place. It's useless in the second."

"What's foolhardy?" he asked her. "What's useless?"

"Let's not beat around the bush," she told him. "I know what you're up to. You've got the idea that if you can break Wildfire and train him, and win a race with him at Red City, I won't marry Rod Torres. Isn't that right?"

"Why—" said Joe.

"Well," she said, "you've figured it out all wrong, because I've given Rod my word. You understand? I'm going to marry him, whatever happens."

"But, Tess!"

"I've given my word," she repeated. And then she added in the same breath, "Joe, promise me. Please! You'll only break your neck if you keep this up. Wildfire wasn't ever meant to be ridden. He isn't a horse. He's a devil."

There was an unmistakable deep, sweet solicitude in her voice, this time. Joe, sitting there so close to her, felt himself tremble. She cared for him, he guessed. Guessed? No, why not admit it; it didn't make him out conceited. They'd grown up together, in a way. She'd been sixteen when he'd first come here to her father's ranch, and though she'd later been away at school for two years, there'd always been an intimacy and a deep, abiding friendliness between them.

He reached into her lap for her hand. "Tess—" he begged her. She jerked away; her eyes pleaded with him not to make things any harder for her. And, after a second, he took back his hand. For a brief, wild instant, it had occurred to him that she might be threatening to go ahead and marry Rod, in any case, simply to keep him from being hurt. He saw, now, that as much as she didn't want him hurt, the two things didn't go hand in hand.

It was then, perhaps—then, and in the days following—that the words Heartbreak Ranch occurred to Joe. He was fighting a lost battle, he saw. But he continued to fight it, doggedly, perseveringly; why, he scarcely knew.

He had Wildfire broken by the end of that week—as nearly broken, at any rate, as would ever be possible. You heard of a fiery stallion, now and then, which was difficult to break, but which eventually became gentle—his master's best friend and companion. Wildfire wasn't broken to that extent, and never would be. But the outlaw had learned that less punishment awaited him if he allowed the man to remain astride.

A second week drifted past. Joe had the chance to give Wildfire two workouts on the track at the fair grounds. He saw very little of Tess, those days.

And then the day of the meet at Red City finally arrived, and Joe lined up before the grandstand with fifteen other riders—a five-hundred-dollar purse as the reward for the next minute and a half. A revolver barked and they were off—to be called back. They ran their cowboy races, there at Red City, from a drifting start. At the crack of a gun, they started for a white chalk line, some twenty feet ahead. Then, if they crossed this line fairly together, if no one were leading, they got the flag. But Wildfire lunged the instant the gun went off; nor could Joe hold him in. The stallion crossed the white line a good three lengths ahead of the rest of the field. It was no start, consequently, and they lined up again.

Again the stallion jumped the start. And this time, he ran almost to the three-quarters before Joe could pull him in, wheel him and bring him back. They tried it a third and a fourth time with no better results. And then a track official stepped up to Joe.

"Sorry, Duncan," the man said, "but you know the rules here, don't you? If a jockey can't handle his mount, or if he unnecessarily delays the race and excites the other horses, he can be disqualified. I'm afraid—"

"Dan, listen to me," he begged the official. "Tell you what we'll do if you'll let me. Give me the outside, and let me have Bill Grimes hold him. Let the rest of the field start drifting. When the rest of 'em get the flag, Bill can let go the reins. That way—"

"That way," Dan told him, "you'll be left at the post—fifty feet, at least."

"It'll be my funeral," said Joe, "not the rest of the boys'."

So it was agreed, and they lined up again, Bill standing at the stallion's side this time, holding him by the bridle. The revolver barked again. The rest of them commenced to move. Wildfire tried to lunge; Bill jerked him sideways. But it would have taken more than Bill, more than a dozen Bills, to have held him.

The outlaw reared instantly, jerking Bill off the ground. His front feet flailed at the empty air. He came down, pitched once, and plunged again. And, out of the corner of his eye, Joe caught a glimpse of Bill off his feet now, hanging on for dear life, being dragged alongside the horse. Then Bill lost his hold and fell, and the outlaw was off, on the heels of the others.

Joe braced himself in his stirrups. He mustn't, mustn't cross that white line ahead of the others, this time. And he didn't—by a hair's breadth. Bill had managed to delay the stallion just enough. A red flag in the hands of a man in gaudy white chaps dipped. Fair start! But Joe's troubles weren't over. Wildfire, abreast of the leaders now, wanted instantly to veer diagonally across the track from the outside rail to the inside. And he seemed not to care in the least whether he pushed the rest of the horses out of the way, whether he literally knocked them over to get there.

With a savage jerk on the spade and a simultaneous roweling in the flanks, Joe avoided what would have been a collision and what—from the judges' pergola—would have been a deliberate foul, and veered the pony to the right. It was a gesture so violent that Wildfire brushed him for an instant against the fence, and he felt the side of his leg catch fire. But the maneuver succeeded.

The stallion had already been three-quarters of the way around the track at a dead run, once, but he flattened himself out, now, and ran as if he were fresh from the paddock. The rest of the race probably wasn't very exciting to the spectators. Wildfire had seized a two-length lead by the quarter. He widened it at the half; held it at the three-quarters; and then he came into the stretch. The rest of the field was strung out behind him, but he redoubled his efforts. It didn't occur to him to coast to any easy victory. He was still gathering speed when he thundered across the finish line, the din of the crowd's applause in his ears.

Joe pulled in on his reins. It was over. But it wasn't over! Wildfire, without abating his speed in the slightest, ran on up the track to the quarter again. At the half, he had the bit in his teeth and was still running. He came to the three-quarters, and banked once more into the stretch.

And then Joe saw them up there ahead of him—his friends, his neighbors, the whole holiday crowd which, a moment before, had filled the grandstand or had gathered along the outside rail. They'd overflowed, as they always did at the finish of a race, onto the track.

He rose with all his weight on the stirrups. He made a final, mighty heave on the reins against the stallion's braced neck; tried to jerk Wildfire's head upward. And then it happened! But not what he'd tried to accomplish.

They rode stock saddles in their races at Red Lake, to be sure. They called them stock saddles at any rate, because they had a pommel and a cantle and shoulders. But they were far lighter than the real stock saddle of the range. And now, as Joe's feet went so violently against the stirrups, a stirrup latigo broke suddenly on the off side. And it was all over. Like that!

He struck the track before he even knew what had happened. He heard the crowd's shout of dismay. It seemed to him that he picked out Tess' scream over and above the rest. And then, simultaneously, in that endless, groggy second that it took him to get to his hands and knees, he realized that the crowd hadn't screamed in terror at its own plight. They'd cried out because of him! Wildfire, the instant he'd unseated him, had pulled up, wheeled and turned back!

Joe tried to crawl for the fence, to slide under the lower rail; couldn't, somehow. It might have been the shock of the fall, it might have been his rib injury of a couple of weeks before. At any rate, he couldn't coordinate. The stallion reached him!

He felt the outlaw's teeth clamp shut like the jaws of a steel trap upon the fleshy part of his shoulder. Pain, intense and devastating, flooded through him. The stallion snapped his head from side to side, tore at the wound, then reared. He saw a shadow flip upward above him; descend. He tried to roll over. One hoof missed him. One didn't. He felt the bone of a forearm snap. Then, as a wave of sheer agony carried him off to unconsciousness, he saw the rearing horse rise again.

HE came back to consciousness amid the sickish, sweet smell of antiseptics in the fair-grounds hospital. He saw a cascade of golden hair. He looked up into two blue eyes, wet with tears. "Joe—Joe, darling," Tess sobbed.

She bent closer. He felt her kisses, cool on his fevered forehead. He reached up with his one good arm, slipped it round her neck and brought her lips close to his. Then, after a second, a little shudder ran through him. He mustn't let her do this; kiss him, because—

She seemed to guess what had come over him. "I'm not marrying Rod," she told him, smiling. "And I didn't break my word, either. Though I would have, I guess. I—I didn't have to jilt him, Joe. He jilted me."

"He what?"

"When I cut him across the face with my quirt," she told him. "I tried to get to you, Joe, when Wildfire started for you. But Rod caught my arm, wouldn't let me go. He—he was really thinking of my best interests, I reckon, because there was probably nothing I could have done for you. I didn't have a gun like the man who finally shot Wildfire. But something happened to me when Rod tried to stop me. I had to get to you. I *had* to. And when Rod jerked me back, I whirled on him. I had my riding quirt in my hand, and I cut him across the face with it. And—and after that, he decided I wasn't a very nice girl, I reckon." She broke off, her eyes half sober, half whimsical.

And Joe drew her face down close to his again. He said finally, "Of course I'm not rich. And I don't know what I've really accomplished—"

"You've seen us out of the woods till the interest's due again in the fall," she told him. "And for the time being, we won't worry about that. I'm not afraid, with you."

"I'm no miracle man, though," he told her.

"No?" She kissed him again, and then again, and then still again.

Joe closed his eyes, drifted dreamily, peacefully off into sleep. Heartbreak Ranch? Not any more!

By Charles E. Barnes

The Mask

He placed his life in jeopardy for the sake of the woman who had been as a mother to him. But there was a girl who understood and, even while she feared for him, was glad he was such a man.

I

IT was a stubborn cow that pitched Larry Drake headlong into trouble. With the mesa in sight, grass and water ahead, the foolish creature seemed determined to get back to the barren wastes of Monument Ridge. Without warning came another sudden bolt in an effort to get out of the draw down which they were slowly moving. Like an arrow Larry's horse darted up the ridge to head off the animal. The cow turned back, but on the crest of the rise Larry pulled up with a start.

Before him stretched the wide, bare mesa, its brown surface marked only by the white ribbon of road which skirted the base of the hills. The only moving thing in sight, the four-horse stage on its way to Briscoe, was at that moment dropping out of view where the road crossed a wide arroyo. But what held Larry rigid was the figure of a horseman, motionless as a statue behind a jutting point of rock, close to where the road came out over the edge.

The meaning of it was clear. It was to be a hold-up, another of the many robberies committed by the Masked Bandit, whose identity was a mystery. No one knew who he was, and all efforts to catch him had failed, though his seemingly accurate

knowledge of when and where to strike indicated that he was a local man—perhaps a prominent one.

It was barely a minute before the straining horses appeared, dragging the heavy coach up the steep bank of the arroyo. Larry was two miles away—too far to give any warning. Unable to interfere, he could only look on while the stage and its passengers were robbed. As the coach came over the edge, he saw the horseman dart out from behind the rock, and the driver rein his horses to a stop.

The rest of it was not as Larry had expected. This time it was the Masked Bandit who had fallen into a trap. From the door of the coach came a puff of smoke. The bandit's gun replied. The lingering reports came to Larry's ears—one—two—three—four. Suddenly the horseman swung about and raced for the hills. He was bending low over his horse's neck, grasping leather. He might be wounded, or he might only be trying to escape the bullets the driver was sending after him. In a moment he had vanished in a draw of the foothills.

At the stage only the driver was visible. He had sprung to the ground and was pulling open the door of the coach. But Larry did not wait to see more. He was racing at a breakneck pace up the barren slope.

He had but one thought in his mind. This mysterious bandit was delivered into his hands. The draw into which the man had escaped confined him to one route over the main ridge. It would be a close thing, but Larry meant to head him off at the top.

It was a wild ride. For anyone less familiar with the ground it would have been a desperately dangerous one. He had farther to go than the masked robber, and must travel over treacherous, rock-strewn slopes gashed by ugly ravines, while the other would be climbing on a well-marked trail. But Larry had confidence in his horse. He knew that few could match it in speed over rough ground, and he counted on the bandit feeling safe from pursuit and climbing slowly. He took a hundred chances of breaking his horse's legs or his own neck, but he arrived at the notch through which the trail crossed the ridge, confident he was in ample time.

There he settled himself to wait, glad of a chance to rest his horse; but when an hour had passed and there was no sign of the robber, he began to feel uneasy. It was possible that the man had turned back, or, if he had been wounded in the fight at the stage, perhaps had fallen by the way.

Larry mounted and slowly rode down the trail, alert at every instant for sight or sound of a horse coming up. He was halfway down to the mesa and was beginning to think he had failed, when he came suddenly on a riderless horse slowly wandering up the gorge.

It was a red bay, a horse he had never seen before. When he had caught it, his first keen glance was in search of a brand; but there was none on it. There was no blood on the saddle, but that proved nothing. A man might be mortally wounded, yet not bleed much. This thought sent Larry hurrying down the gorge.

A few hundred yards and he saw, first, a booted leg protruding from a jumble of boulders, then the huddled figure of a man sprawled limply among the rocks. It needed but a glance to see that he was dead.

He was dressed in the ordinary garb of a cowboy, but the entire face was covered by a black mask, perfectly concealing his identity.

Larry leaped from the saddle. He was not to capture the Masked Bandit, but at least he would know what neighbor's face was hidden under that black covering. Alive with curiosity, he stooped and pulled the mask from the dead face, then froze rigid, his eyes widening in a stare of horror.

The dead man was Dick Allison, one of his best friends, the son of a woman who had been a second mother to Larry, and cousin of the girl he was to marry.

Dick a thief! It was incredible! Yet there was no room for doubt. Dick had had a wild streak in him, inherited from his father, but he had always seemed honest as the day, and passionately devoted to his mother. Staring, horror-struck, at the features he knew so well, Larry conjured up a vision of gentle Mother Allison, whose whole life was bound up in her son.

Only the day before Larry had stood by

her side while they watched Dick gentle a particularly high-spirited horse. At least *she* had watched, but Larry had looked at her face, and at the pride and boundless love that shone from her kind, old eyes. She had turned to him. He could hear her voice now:

"I'm a proud woman, Larry. He's a wonderful son. He's got the daredevil in him of his father, but he's as gentle as a woman. Dick will never fail me."

And Dick lay here, killed while trying to rob the stage. The blow to his mother's heart would be worse than death. Larry's lips set tight with resolve. If it was humanly possible to prevent it, she should never know the truth.

He thrust the mask under his shirt, then swiftly ran his eyes over the sprawled form. The only thing about the clothing that might serve to identify him with the man who had attacked the stage, was the blue handkerchief around the neck. Larry removed it, substituting his own bandanna. Then he drew the gun from Dick's belt, broke it and examined the cartridges. Two had been exploded, but it was at the gun itself he frowned.

It was not Dick's gun. Dick always carried a weapon that had belonged to his father, one that could be easily recognized. Perhaps, Larry thought, it was for that reason he was careful not to use it on his marauding expeditions. Larry replaced Dick's gun with his own, which was clean and fully loaded.

Satisfied that there was now nothing about the body to connect it with the Masked Bandit, he moved away.

A short distance up the gorge one bank was composed of broken stones, a rock slide from the cliff above. Larry climbed halfway up the slide, thrust the mask and the handkerchief down between two boulders, then started a small slide to bury them deeply.

There was now only the bay horse. That must not be found near where Dick fell. From his elevation on the slide he could see the horse, already far up the gorge and climbing steadily. It was moving as if it knew where it was going, and meant to get there.

For some minutes Larry watched it, his mind growing easier. He concluded that Dick naturally would have had a hide-out somewhere over the ridge, where he would change from his own horse to the unmarked bay. The bay was heading for home and might never be found. He would have to trust to luck for that. At present he must get Dick's body home. Later he would search for that hiding place.

With his friend's body draped over his saddle, the long, slow ride to the Forty-Four, the Allison ranch, was a nightmare to Larry. In every fiber he shrank from what lay ahead of him. He had done what he could to soften the blow, but he knew he was bringing utter desolation to the tenderest heart in the world. He would gladly have changed places with Dick rather than face Mother Allison and see the soft light in her kindly eyes change to the anguish of a broken heart.

In approaching the ranch, the buildings were hidden from view by a belt of trees. It was not until he rode in through the gate that he was observed. The few men who were in the enclosure gathered about him with awed faces, eagerly questioning. Larry hardly answered them. His eyes were fixed on a girl who had appeared on the ranch-house porch and was now running toward him, her winsome face colorless, and in her eyes a growing look of horror. When she came near, the men drew back in respectful silence.

"What is it, Larry?" she gasped. "It isn't—isn't—Dick!"

Larry gravely nodded.

"Yes, it's Dick," he said. "I found him up on the gulch trail. Somebody had killed him—shot him close enough to burn his shirt."

There was nothing timid about Jean Harper. Born on the range, she had lived her life among men who, in their quarrels, invoked no law but the sixgun. Sudden death was no strange thing to her, but this tragedy seemed to fill her with speechless horror. Then it became evident that her thoughts had flown in the same direction as Larry's.

"Poor Aunt Mary!" she said at last. "This will kill her, Larry."

"I know—and I'm afraid, Jean! Where is she?"

"She's in the kitchen. Oh! I'm glad she wasn't in front! She must know before she sees him. Give me time, Larry."

She turned and ran back to the house. Watching her flying figure, Larry's eyes gleamed with pride in the girl who so bravely undertook the task from which he shrank.

He lingered several minutes, then slowly rode to the house. Curtly refusing assistance from the men, he himself lifted the body of his friend from the saddle and carried it in.

II

LARRY came face to face with the two women in the living room. He feared that Mrs. Allison would break down at sight of her dead son, but there was no sign of weakness about this silver-haired old lady. Her face was ghastly in its pallor, and her eyes, usually so soft, were like two chunks of ice. Yet it was she who smoothed a pillow on the couch and motioned him to lay his burden there.

During long minutes she looked down at the still features without making a sound. Then, in a voice that was curiously dry and hard, she asked:

"Who did this, Larry?"

"I don't know," Larry replied. "I found him up on the gulch trail. He had been dead some time."

She was silent a moment, then spoke again in the same peculiar tone.

"I think I know. Dick had no enemies, but he was dead set on catching that Masked Bandit who's been robbing everybody. He's been away a good deal lately, hunting for him. I reckon he found him. It was the Masked Bandit that killed my boy. Larry, I want you to bring me that man."

"I sure will try."

In spite of his effort there was a note of embarrassment in Larry's reply. Jean looked at him curiously, but Mrs. Allison seemed not to notice it. She knelt down by the couch, where she remained motionless, the frozen look still on her face. Jean beckoned to Larry and together they stole out onto the porch, leaving her with her dead.

Larry drew a long breath of relief.

"I'm glad that's over," he said. "I didn't think she'd take it so well."

"Do you think she's taking it well?" asked Jean in a tone of pity for his ignorance. "I'd give anything in the world to see her break down and cry."

Larry looked doubtful. He could think of nothing more heartrending than to see a woman cry.

"It's just like a man," Jean went on. "Because you can't see it, you think she isn't suffering. You're going to learn something about Aunt Mary. I wouldn't want to be the Masked Bandit when she finds out who he is. You're going to find him, aren't you, Larry?"

Larry did not answer. He was looking with peculiar intentness at something beyond her, and appeared not to have heard her question. Following the direction of his gaze, she saw two men who had left the group before the bunkhouse door and, with rapid strides, were coming toward the porch.

One, lean and wiry, she recognized as Ricky Sloane, deputy sheriff and a friend of long standing. The other, a strikingly handsome man with a dashing air of assurance, brought a momentary frown to her face.

"I wish Gil Foster would stay away from here!" she exclaimed, lowering her voice, for the men were very near.

Foster could hardly help seeing that he was unwelcome, but if he did he gave no sign. He did not look at Larry, but addressed Jean in a soft voice that was full of sympathy.

"The boys have just been telling me about Dick. I can't tell you how sorry I am, Jean. It must have been a terrible blow to his mother. But you can tell her that we'll hang the man who killed him."

"You'll have to find out who did it, before you can hang him," Jean replied rather coldly.

"No trouble about that," Foster assured her. "It was the Masked Bandit."

"How do you know?"

"I was up on the ridge this morning,

looking for strays, and when I was coming down the hogback I saw a fellow down in the gulch acting strange. He was burying something up on the rock slide. I was curious, and after he was gone, I went over to see what he'd been hiding. I dug it out, and here it is!"

He held out a black mask and a blue handkerchief.

"Coming down," he continued, "I ran into Ricky, and he told me the Masked Bandit tried to hold up the stage this morning by the big arroyo. They were ready for him this time, and he found it too hot. He made his getaway up the gulch, and it's easy to see what happened. He met Dick on the trail. Mebbe Dick recognized him. He shot Dick, and then he buried his mask and doubled back to the mesa, figuring nobody would suspect him."

"That doesn't help any till you know who he is," Jean declared.

"But I do know who he is! The man I saw in the gulch—the man who killed Dick and buried these things was *you*—Larry Drake!"

Larry was not taken entirely by surprise. His instinct had told him what was coming, and his brain was wildly groping for some way to meet it. Ricky Sloane had not spoken a word, but Larry was aware that the deputy, with his hand on his gun, had been watching him like a hawk.

There seemed only one thing to do. All his work to keep Dick out of it had gone for nothing. He must tell the truth. But Foster's mention of his name was followed by a choking gasp that drew his startled gaze to the doorway. Mrs. Allison was standing there, and the horror in her eyes told him she had heard the whole story.

To tell in her hearing what he had found in the gulch was beyond his power. Even if he could bring himself to do it, he instinctively felt that she would not believe him; nor, perhaps, would these men.

When he was stirred, thought and action were simultaneous with Larry. His muscles acted as quickly as the thought that moved them. The porch was three steps above the ground. Larry was standing at the top. Foster was one step below him, but on the other side near Jean. Ricky Sloane was mounting toward him, in the act of drawing his gun, his lips opened to speak.

Larry's move was as swift as it was unexpected. He hurled himself straight at the deputy. His shoulder struck Sloane full in the chest and sent him to the ground with a shock that left him stunned.

He cleared the fallen man with a flying leap, aware that Foster was making a frantic effort to shoot. But Jean had grasped the gun with both hands, as Foster drew it from the holster. Larry's horse stood where he had left it, only a few paces from the steps. A flying leap took him to the saddle without touching stirrup, and in an instant he was sweeping toward the gate with the rush of a whirlwind.

He was almost there before he heard the bark of a gun and the scream of a passing bullet. The next moment he was through the fringe of trees and safe, but he did not slacken speed. No one at the ranch had been mounted. It would take them perhaps a minute or two to get horses, and then they would be after him.

His mount seemed to recognize that this was a race for life, and it needed no urging. With head outstretched, its steel-spring muscles working with the regularity of a clock, it covered the brown mesa at a pace that gave Larry a thrill of surprise, well as he knew its wonderful speed.

He was heading for the broken ground of Monument Ridge and was a mile on the way before he saw horsemen streaming out from the ranch. The accusation and his escape had come like the sudden burst of a cyclone out of a blue sky, but he already had a clear idea of what he meant to do. First of all, he must lose these men who were on his trail.

With the lead he had gained, this would not be difficult. He knew every foot of the rugged, barren ridge. The man who followed him there would need to be on a horse with wings.

III

NESTLING at the base of Monument Ridge, Larry Drake's ranch, known as the Half Moon, was a true oasis in a

thirsty desert. Watered by an artesian well, it was like a green gem gleaming on the breast of a dead world. Three miles to the north the squat buildings of Briscoe, a typical cattle town, were plainly visible. Behind it rose the barren slope of the sun-baked ridge, but in all other directions was only the flat, level mesa studded with sage-brush.

The main road to Briscoe ran by the gate. It was a decidedly public place for a man who was wanted, but an hour before sundown Larry appeared on the road from the south, riding at a leisurely pace, for all the world like a man returning home with his day's work done.

He rode into the enclosure with no sign of hurry, and was met at the corral by a lanky, raw-boned cowboy whose solemn expression was belied by the constant twinkle in his deep-set eyes.

"Give Jerry a rub-down, Slim, and a good feed," said Larry as he swung from the saddle. "He's had a hard run and has got to travel some more."

Slim Farley looked as if he would like to ask questions, but Larry at once strode away to the house. There, moving swiftly, but still with no sign of haste, he took from his bed a pair of blankets, then from the kitchen cupboard selected a supply of food. He was rolling up his pack when Slim Farley came in.

"Hello! Goin' fishin'?" Slim drawled.

"Not so far," Larry replied. "I'm goin' over the ridge."

"Meanin', I reckon, you got a rope on Jashuay."

"Joshua, who?"

"Why, the feller that made the sun stand still. You'll be needin' him."

"I can make it in the dark," Larry assured him.

"Say! Are you loco? Or is the sheriff after you?"

"I should say he is," Larry answered with a grim smile. "You don't know that I'm the Masked Bandit and that I killed Dick Allison some time this mornin'."

"I could suspicion a lot o' things about you, but I didn't happen to think o' that."

"That's the way the sheriff's got it figured."

"I allus figgered his brain box was all bone," Slim snorted. "I'll ride to Briscoe an' make Dave Corby eat crow. There's forty-'leven ways o' provin' you ain't that sidewinder."

"I don't want to prove it now," Larry replied, and made Slim stare with wide-eyed astonishment. "I can't tell you why, but I'm goin' to fade away for a time—till I can think straight. But I want you to do somethin' for me, Slim."

"Anythin' but shootin' the sheriff—an' I might do that!"

"I want you to ride to the Forty-Four and see Jean. Tell her I must see her, and I'll be waitin' tomorrow noon at Pinnacle Rock. Mebbe she won't want to come," he went on a little heavily, "but she must! You must make her! Tell her I can explain everythin'. Tell her anythin', but persuade her to come."

"I ain't much on persuadin' women, but she ain't so big my hoss can't carry double. You kin bet your stack she'll be there. Are you ridin' Jerry? I saddled the gray, figgerin' mebbe you'd wanta change."

"No, I've got to have Jerry on this trip. The gray would be too much like travelin' with a brass band. Take a look and see if the road's clear."

Slim went out, but was back in a very few minutes, his eyes fairly dancing, though his face was as solemn as ever.

"There's a bunch comin' up the road," he drawled, "an' 'peared to me one of 'em's Ricky Sloane."

"Then I reckon it's time for me to be lopin' along," said Larry, taking up his roll.

"You ain't got time to git away 'thout 'em seein' you."

"They can't catch me," Larry answered indifferently.

" 'Tain't no use runnin' when you don't have to," said Slim. "There's a feller in town owes me five dollars, an' I'm in a mighty hurry to c'lect. I'm gonna take the gray an' git after that feller. From behind, I ain't a whole lot better lookin' than you be, an' Ricky ain't never seen nobody but you on the gray. Mebbe you'd better give me your hat. You take Jerry behind the barn an' watch me play tag with the law!"

IV

RICKY SLOANE and his posse were still some distance away, coming from the south and riding slowly. With the horse, Jerry, ready for another run, after its rest and feed, his blanket roll tied on the saddle, Larry took a position behind the barn where he could not be seen from the road.

Peering around the corner, he saw Slim Farley leisurely mount the gray horse that was known by every man on the range as the second horse of Larry Drake's string. Slim rode out of the gate at a walk, and faced south on the road; but, as if he had then for the first time seen the posse, he swung about and, putting spurs to his horse raced toward Briscoe at a whirlwind pace.

The ruse worked like a charm. The group of horsemen suddenly sprang to life. A minute later they swept by the ranch with a thunder of hoofs, with eyes for nothing but the man on the gray now far ahead.

The race was soon shut out from Larry by a cloud of dust, but he knew that Ricky Sloane's tired horses would not get near the gray until Slim was ready to be caught. Then there would be one mad deputy sheriff! Larry could imagine how Slim would enjoy baiting him, and the picture brought a grin to his lips as he mounted and rode slowly to the draw that broke the ridge behind the ranch.

When it still lacked an hour of noon, Larry was already at Pinnacle Rock, anxiously watching the mesa in the direction of the Forty-Four. He had spent hours vainly searching for some way out of his predicament, but that anxiety was as nothing compared to his fear that Jean would not come. If she did not, it would mean that she believed he was guilty of the horrible crime of which Foster had accused him. Slim would do his best, but it would take more than Slim to make her do anything against her will.

As the sun moved steadily nearer to the zenith, his heart sank lower. A depression such as he had never known seized him. His whole world was reduced to chaos. If Jean did not believe in him, he had nothing more for which to hope.

Pinnacle Rock rose like a church steeple on the edge of a bluff overlooking the mesa. From its base his view extended many miles. If she were coming, she would long ago have been in sight. But nowhere could his strained vision detect a moving thing except countless grazing cattle.

The sun was shining straight down from overhead. Larry, no longer searching the mesa, had sunk into a stupor of despair. Suddenly from behind him came the clink of an iron shoe on rock.

Startled, he turned like a flash, his hand on his gun. His heart stood still, then beat furiously. Riding toward him down the barren slope was Jean, and it was the Jean he had always known, with a dancing light in her eyes and a welcoming smile on her lips.

"Hello, Larry!" she hailed him cheerfully as she jumped to the ground. "Did you think I wasn't coming?"

Larry, still half dazed, answered soberly:

"I was mortally afraid."

"I couldn't help being late," she explained. "Ricky Sloane must have been watching the ranch. I found him and another man trailing me. I had to lead them a chase and lose them on the ridge. Now, let's sit down and you tell me about this foolish game at which you're playing."

She seated herself on a rock and motioned him to her side.

"Then you don't believe what Foster said about me?" asked Larry.

"Don't be foolish! Of course I don't!" she snapped. "I wouldn't believe anything Gil Foster said, anyhow."

"Does Mrs. Allison believe it?"

A shade passed over Jean's face leaving her eyes very sober.

"I can't make out what she thinks. She won't talk about it at all. She's like an iceberg with a volcano shut up inside. But she can't believe it, Larry! It's more likely she suspects you're shielding Dick—and I *know* you are."

Startled, Larry demanded:

"How do you know?"

"Isn't it true?"

Larry answered with a gloomy nod.

"Tell me about it."

He told her the story of the hold-up, his race to head off the bandit; of finding

Dick's body with the mask still covering the face; and what he had done to hide the fact that Dick was the Masked Bandit.

"I just couldn't tell his mother that," he said in conclusion. "When Foster threw that bombshell and I saw her standin' in the doorway—well, I just flunked it."

"I know," was Jean's understanding reply. "You did just what I would have expected of you. It was noble, but you don't know what you *have* done, Larry. Sheriff Corby was riding in the stage yesterday, hoping to catch the Masked Bandit. When it was held up, he was killed. The masked robber shot him through the heart. Now, don't you see? You can't carry this on any longer; they're after you now for murder. You've got to tell the truth!"

Larry was silent for a moment, then he exclaimed:

"Dick just couldn't have done that!"

"I don't know," said Jean doubtfully. "Aunt Mary always said Dick was just like his father, and from all accounts Mat Allison, before he was married, was a fighting daredevil."

"But I never heard that he was a thief!" Larry retorted. "And I can't make myself believe it of Dick. There's somethin' wrong about all this, Jean. I don't know where it is, but I feel it, and it's somethin' crooked as hell. I won't put that thing on Dick till I'm dead sure!"

"I'm afraid you won't have any choice."

"Why not?"

"Because Gil Foster knows Dick was the Masked Bandit."

"What makes you think that?"

"He told me. Last night, for the third time, he asked me to marry him."

"I reckon I know what answer he got," said Larry with a grin.

"I told him that the man I married wouldn't be a liar. It was foolish, perhaps, because it made him ugly. He threatened all sorts of things. He could hang you, or he could make the name of Allison a byword in the whole county, and he'd do one or the other if I refused him.

"I laughed at him, and then he told me. He saw you take the mask and handkerchief from Dick's body. If you don't tell Aunt Mary, he will."

As Larry listened, his face gradually hardened and his eyes narrowed until they were mere slits. He was silent for a time after she had finished, and when he spoke there was a suppressed eagerness in his voice.

"He told you that he saw that?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Did he tell you where he was when he saw me?"

"No."

"Well, that sidewinder's going to tell *me*. I've got a hunch he won't do anythin' to the name of Allison! You sure started somethin' when you made him mad."

"What in the world do you mean?"

"Why, it's doggone funny if he could see Dick down there in the gorge, and I couldn't see him. And you can bet your life I wasn't missin' anythin'. If he lied to you, I'm curious about how he knew the mask was on Dick—and I mean to find out!"

"What are you going to do?"

Larry did not answer. He was looking up the slope at two horsemen who were coming over the crest of a ridge. One of the riders was Ricky Sloane. Jean had not been as successful as she thought in losing her trailers.

It looked as if Larry was in a trap. The bluff on which he stood was of earth, but its face, for a short distance, was almost perpendicular; then a slope, almost as steep, down to the mesa. Even Jerry's speed could not carry him along the bluff in either direction without bringing him into gunshot range of the deputy; and that he could not afford to risk.

There was no time for hesitation. The moment he recognized Sloane, he sprang to his horse. A leap took him into the saddle and, not heeding Jean's cry of alarm, he spurred Jerry over the crumbling edge.

There was a swift toboggan, when it seemed as if nothing could keep him from plunging over Jerry's head. Then they struck the bank and, accompanied by a small avalanche, leaping and sliding, they reached the bottom, the horse was still on its feet.

There were other reckless riders on the range who might have followed him, but Ricky Sloane was not of the number. When Larry, racing over the mesa, turned to wave a reassuring hand to Jean, the two riders were standing still at the edge of the bluff, and Larry could imagine they were cursing.

V

LARRY was safe, and a few minutes' riding carried him beyond a jutting shoulder of the hills where he was out of view from the bluff, but he did not check his headlong pace. An idea was simmering in his mind. It was only a glimmer, like a single ray of light piercing a dense fog, but he could not rest until he had seen all that ray could show him.

He was heading for Gil Foster's ranch, the Cross Circle. It was a dangerous place for him to venture, but he gave that little thought. He knew that they were branding calves at the Cross Circle. The men would all be busy in the calf pasture, but Gil Foster was not a worker. If he were at home, he would very likely be loafing in the ranch house, and all Larry wanted was a few minutes alone with him.

As Larry neared the ranch, the distressful mooing of the cows massed outside the pasture fence told him that the branding was not finished. Leaving the road, he placed the ranch buildings between him and the pasture, and pulled down to a walk.

Within the enclosure there was no one in sight. Things could not have been arranged better for his purpose. His pulse bounded, then he reined in with a frown.

He could reach the gate without being noticed, but he had not one chance in a hundred of riding from the gate to the house without being seen by the men in the pasture. They would recognize him, if it was only by his horse, and that would destroy all hope of reaching Foster. He could not leave the horse outside. He must have Jerry close at hand. He was likely to be in a hurry when he left.

During a long minute Larry sat motionless, his frown growing heavier. The thought of failing when he was so near to his object, and all because he dared not cross those few yards of open ground, was more than he could bear. A vision of what failure meant to him and to the memory of Dick Allison made him desperate. In another moment he would have been on his way to the house, reckless of the risk, but the sudden appearance of a man moving with leisurely strides from the house to the stable, held him still.

The man was Gil Foster, and every one of Larry's nerves was tingling as he watched the slowly moving figure. Would he go into the stable, or on past it to the pasture? Success or failure hung on the answer. Larry could reach the stable without being seen—unless Foster turned and looked back! That would spoil everything.

There was another minute of anxious suspense, Larry almost holding his breath as Foster drew near to the stable and still appeared to be making straight for the door. He went in, without looking back, and Larry's heart leaped as he moved toward the gate.

Even yet there was a chance that he might not make it. Foster might come out at any moment and see him at once. There was need of haste, but nothing would bring the rancher out so quickly as the sound of a running horse. Larry forced himself to move at a walk, his eyes fixed in a strained gaze on the stable door. The distance was not great, but it seemed an age before he pulled up at the stable wall. When he swung out of the saddle, however, all his anxiety left him. There was a smile on his face as he stepped to the open door.

Larry almost collided with Foster, who was coming out. The shock of surprise drove the color from Foster's face, but with a movement incredibly swift his hand flew to the gun in his belt. He was fast, but Larry was faster. With his gun pressed hard against Foster's ribs, he drawled:

"Don't do it, Foster! It's plumb suicide. I'll take it, just to prevent accidents. And then we'll have a little talk."

He took the weapon Foster had not yet drawn, and for a moment studied the man's handsome, scowling face.

"Foster," he said suddenly, "you're a slinkin', poisonous, lowdown liar!"

Foster's face flushed at the insult, and his eyes glared murder, but he made no reply.

"That was a pretty yarn you told yesterday," Larry went on, "but it was all a lie! You didn't see me in the gulch."

"If I didn't see you, how would I know where to dig up that mask and handkerchief?" asked Foster with a sneer.

"I'm not sayin' that I wasn't there, but I've got mighty good eyesight and I didn't see *you*. If you'd been there, I couldn't have helped seein' you. You couldn't find cover enough to hide your hat!"

"How about Castle Rock?"

"Hm-m, yeah. I reckon you could hide there."

"That's where I was."

"Now, I'm wonderin' what would take you to Castle Rock."

"That's none of your business, but I was lucky enough to be there." Foster had regained his assurance. With an air of gloating triumph he went on, "I've got you where I want you, Drake! You're going to step out of my way for good. I don't want to hang you, but I will unless you clear out. Ricky Sloane is on your trail, and you can't dodge him many hours. If you're wise, you'll head over the ridge and keep going."

"So you figure I'd better run."

"It's that or the rope. Besides, I reckon you wouldn't enjoy being round here when I marry Jean Harper."

"If I live to see that, I'll live a long time," Larry retorted.

"She'll marry me any time I say," Foster sneered. "She can't help herself."

Larry had been keeping himself well in hand. He knew that he should go, if he wanted to get away with a whole skin. But the sneer in Foster's voice, recalling the vile means by which Jean was to be forced, made him see red. Outwardly he appeared cool and strangely deliberate, but inside he was a cauldron of boiling rage. He took a step backward to where Jerry was standing, thrust his gun into the saddle holster and threw to some distance the one he had taken from Foster.

"There's one thing you're goin' to get, hombre, that you haven't counted on," he said with a softness that sounded dangerous. "I don't reckon you'll ever hang me, and I'm durn sure you won't ever marry Jean Harper. But right now you're goin' to take the damndest lickin' any man ever had and lived to remember. Stop me if you can!"

When he realized that Larry meant to fight with his hands, a gleam of joy flashed in Foster's eyes, and he smiled. He was a powerfully built man, heavier than Larry, and he had a reputation for being more than dangerous in a rough-and-tumble. On the other hand Larry was quick as a cat, and, though he appeared slender, there was tremendous strength in his shoulders and arms. He was mad clean through; but it was a cold rage which left his mind clear.

He knew his man. He had seen Foster in a rough-and-tumble fight and knew how dangerous it would be to get into his grip. That it would come to that sooner or later he did not doubt, but he aimed to so punish the heavier man that when they finally came to grips he would have at least an even chance.

Larry knew something about boxing—not much, but enough to put all the power of his shoulders into his blows. When one landed, it had the crushing force of a pile-driver. For a man who spent his life in the saddle, he was abnormally light and quick on his feet. When Foster rushed at him with the headlong fury of a mad bull, Larry sidestepped and sent a swinging right to the rancher's ear.

The fight became a running battle, in which Larry had the appearance of being driven from one point to another by Foster's furious rushes. In reality he was getting in his punishment and taking very little in return. Foster's face showed the effects of more than one smashing blow. Blood was streaming from his nose, and one eye was beginning to close.

Suddenly he became cautious, circling about Larry as if waiting for an opening, a chance for a surprise leap that would get him inside those terrible fists. Too late Larry saw his real object. His circling had brought him close to the horse, Jerry. Like a flash he reached for the gun in the saddle holster.

But he had not counted on Jerry. Larry

could not have stopped him, but as Foster's hand went up, Jerry leaped away and faced him with bared teeth and a wicked gleam in white-rimmed eyes.

Larry was quick to seize his opportunity. A straight-arm, smashing blow landed full on Foster's mouth and crushed his lips. The pain made him mad with rage. He no longer tried for a wrestler's hold. With arms working like flails he attempted to return Larry's bone-crushing punches.

It was Larry's turn to do the driving. He made no attempt to guard himself. He was insensible to the few blows that reached him. But in the next minute he finished his work of making a wreck of Foster's once handsome face. A final, terrific punch found the button on Foster's chin, and he went down like a man struck by lightning.

As he crashed to the ground, a wild yell warned Larry of danger. Only then he realized that he had driven Foster beyond the corner of the stable, and that the end of the battle had been in full view from the calf pasture.

Men were already running toward him. They had let down the bars, and two mounted men were coming out with a rush. They were less than two hundred yards away, but Larry was less than ten from Jerry. There had been no time for reaction after his tremendous exertion. A few strides and a flying leap and he was on Jerry's back.

As if shot from a bow, the horse sprang into its marvelous run. Only a dark streak marked Larry's passage from the stable to the gate. Behind him guns were barking. He heard the whine of bullets. But he swept through the gate like a bursting cyclone—and safe!

VI

TWO full days had passed, and at the Forty-Four life had resumed its usual routine. In the cosy living room Mrs. Allison sat by the window, knitting. Her drawn face and tired eyes showed plainly the depth of her suffering, but she was not wearing the icy shell that had seemed to enclose her on the day her son was brought home to her. Her stillness now was more as if some grim, determined purpose helped her to repress her grief.

Moving quietly about the room, Jean Harper was making a pretense of dusting the small objects, but at the same time she was furtively watching her aunt's face. At last, as if she had reached the breaking point of her endurance, she blurted out an abrupt question.

"Aunt Mary, you've got to tell me! Do you believe Larry is a thief and a murderer?"

"Larry didn't deny it, did he?" Mrs. Allison replied quietly, without looking up from her work.

"No, he didn't. But he had a good reason for not saying anything then."

"What was that reason?"

Jean did not answer at once. She was staring through the window, and the pain in her eyes told of the racking struggle between her fear for Larry and her love for this dear old lady. At last she stammered:

"I—I can't tell you that, Aunt Mary, but I can tell you that Larry is as innocent as—as—"

"As Dick?"

"Y-yes."

Jean's reply was very like a gasp of fright. What could Aunt Mary have meant by that, she asked herself. Could it be possible that she suspected the truth? But Mrs. Allison's next remark quieted her fears.

"My dear, if you won't tell me what you know, I can only judge by what I see. Whether it was Larry Drake or not, the man who killed my boy is going to suffer for it!"

"But it was not Larry!" Jean burst out passionately. "You can't believe it of him, Aunt Mary! You know what Larry is. He couldn't be a thief, and he couldn't kill Dick! Why, they were like brothers."

Mrs. Allison made no reply to this. She acted as if she had not heard it. Calmly she asked:

"Is Dick's belt hanging in the hall?"

Shocked and hurt by this abrupt change of subject, Jean muttered: "Yes."

"Is it just as the boys took it off—the gun in the holster?"

"Yes. Nobody has touched it."

"I don't suppose you looked at that gun."

"No! Why would I?"

Her aunt did not explain. Instead she remarked:

"I see Gil Foster coming. Perhaps I'll learn from him what you won't tell me."

"Anything Gil Foster tells you will be a lie!" Jean declared hotly.

"Sometimes one can learn a great deal from a lie," Mrs. Allison retorted drily.

Foster's horse could now be plainly heard. As he rode up to the house, dismounted, and tramped in through the hall, Jean was going through an agony of fear and suspense. Why was Gil Foster coming here? Was it to do what he had threatened? To tell about Dick? If he did that and could prove that Dick was the Masked Bandit, it would clear Larry, but would utterly crush her aunt. Jean did not know what she hoped for, but her nerves were stretched like fiddle strings as Foster entered.

His face still carried many of the marks left there by Larry's knuckles. Mrs. Allison, who had looked up with a smile of welcome, became all sympathy.

"Why Gil!" she exclaimed. "What have you done to your face?"

"My horse stumbled and spilled me on some rocks," he replied. "It's nothing. I just came over to see if I couldn't be of some help about Dick."

"Thank you, Gil," she replied quietly. "We buried Dick yesterday, beside his father. There's nothing you can do."

"Oh, yes, there's one thing I can do!" Foster rejoined with a savage note in his voice. "I can punish the man who killed him. I promise you that you'll see the rope on Larry Drake's neck."

"Do you feel sure that Larry Drake killed Dick?"

"There can't be any mistake about that," Foster asserted positively. "I almost saw it done."

"It's hard to believe," said Mrs. Allison after a pause, much as if she were talking to herself. "They were like brothers. Larry was almost another son to me. It doesn't seem possible that he could have done it. Yet Dick couldn't have been killed in that way except from ambush or by some friend of whom he had no suspicion. You know how fast he was with a gun. And they tell me his gun was in his holster. Larry wouldn't have stopped to put it there. Dick never drew it."

She paused a moment, then went on:

"It was his father's gun. It once saved his father from an assassin's bullet—the mark is still on it—but it couldn't save Dick. Jean, dear, will you bring me Dick's gun? His belt should be hanging in the hall where the boys put it when they took it off."

Jean moved toward the door, but Foster hastily sprang before her.

"Don't trouble," he said. "I'll get it."

Jean, deliberately ignoring him, would have pushed by, but Mrs. Allison's calm voice checked her.

"Please do," she said. "Come and sit down, Jean."

It was quietly spoken, but Jean recognized in the gentle tone an imperative command. More puzzled than ever, she took a chair near the window and waited, keenly curious to learn what this was leading up to. Knowing her aunt's methods, and that there was always a definite purpose in her simplest actions, she wondered what mystery could be connected with Dick's gun.

In a moment Foster returned and, crossing the room, laid the belt with its holstered gun in Mrs. Allison's lap.

She put down her knitting and drew out the weapon. For a moment she handled it fondly, as if she could feel the touch of the loved hands that had grasped it. Then she pointed to a groove in the hard wood butt.

"Mat carried this in a shoulder holster," she explained. "That mark was made by a rifle bullet fired from ambush. The bullet only plowed his ribs, but if it hadn't been for this gun it would have killed him. Dick prized it more than anything else he owned. He never moved without it."

She broke the gun and looked at the fully loaded chambers.

"It couldn't save my boy," she went on, "and he didn't even have a chance to fight for his life. He was shot by a contemptible coward! It was a cold-blooded murder."

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Allison," Foster

blustered. "We'll get that white-livered skunk, and we'll see him hang!"

"Yes, I'll get him," she declared quietly, but with a grim setting of her lips. "And you can help me, Gil."

"I'll help, all right! I'll do nothing else till I get the rope on his neck. Ricky Sloane's a dumb head. I'll take my boys and scour Monument Ridge till I find him!"

"No, I've got a better plan," said Mrs. Allison. "The Masked Bandit has taken some big risks to steal small sums of money, and he won't miss a chance to make a big haul without danger.

"In that chest of drawers over there is the money I just received for my Hereford herd. Larry Drake knows that the deal was to be closed today and that I would be paid in cash. Tonight I'll send all the boys to Briscoe. They're all wanting to go to the big dance. There will be no one here with the money but Jean and myself. We must manage to let Larry Drake know that—and that's where you can help me, Gil. You must manage it somehow. If he's the Masked Bandit he won't let such a chance slip."

"I see," said Foster, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "You'll send the boys away, but they'll come back and lay for him."

"No, they'll go to Briscoe and stay there."

"But what can you do alone?" Foster objected. "You may prove that Larry Drake is the Masked Bandit, but you'll lose your money."

"Perhaps, but I'm willing to lose it if I can learn for certain who killed my boy."

"Well, mebbe you won't need to lose it." Foster was now all eagerness. "I can get word to Drake. That long-faced clown at the Half Moon, Slim Farley, is sure to be in touch with him. I'll see that Farley knows the money's here and that you're alone.

"Drake won't dare to come out of the hills before dark, and he can't get here till 'long about midnight. I'll bring a bunch of my boys at ten o'clock and we'll put a ring around this ranch that a weasel couldn't get through. We'll let him get in and take the money, and we'll grab him with the goods on him when he comes out. You leave that part of it to me, and don't you try to stop him! He's desperate, and he wouldn't stop at killing you. Promise me that you'll keep out of his way!"

"We will," she assured him. "I want to see him hung—not shot."

"Good! Then I'll lope along and get things moving. We'll have Drake tonight!"

Jean had been holding herself in by a great effort. When she heard Foster's horse start off at a run, she sprang to her feet and faced her aunt with flashing eyes.

"Aunt Mary, are you crazy?" she stormed. "Do you really expect that Larry will come here with a mask on his face, to steal your money, and to kill you if you get in his way? Your plan is silly! You might as well bait a trap with carrion to catch a deer! You'll lose your money, but it won't be Larry who takes it. Gil Foster is fooling you. He knows that Larry is not the Masked Bandit."

"It seems that everybody knows something they won't tell me," Mrs. Allison retorted with a touch of sarcasm in her voice. "But we'll all know more before morning. Unless I'm very much mistaken, the Masked Bandit will be here tonight."

Meanwhile, Gil Foster, a mile from the ranch, had reined in to a walk and was examining the gun he had taken from the belt that hung in the hall. On the butt were two deeply carved initials—L. D. A moment he stared at them with a puzzled frown, then, in spite of the pain it caused him, he smiled.

VII

THE two days following his fight with Foster were days of strenuous activity for everyone but Larry. Foster, almost insane with rage, was busy planning his revenge. Ricky Sloane, with painstaking thoroughness, was combing Monument Ridge for the man who, he believed, had killed his friend and chief, Sheriff Corby. But while the deputy's posse swarmed over the ridge like a pack of bloodhounds, Larry was resting in comfort at his own ranch, the Half Moon.

In comfort, but not with patience. In

his mind a glimmer of suspicion had grown to a fixed idea. He believed he had solved the mystery of the Masked Bandit and the death of Dick Allison, but to remove the last doubt, he must get to Castle Rock. For that he must wait until Ricky Sloane and his men had worked over the ridge and left the way clear.

During his enforced idleness his mind was on the castle-like formation at the head of the gorge in which he had found Dick. In imagination he stood at that rock and pictured everything he could see. He thought he knew every foot of that rugged, barren slope, every rock and gully that broke the surface; but one thing eluded him. He could not remember how far he could see from that point down the bottom of the winding gorge. Only a visit to the rock could decide that, and on it his whole theory was hinged.

The afternoon of the second day, Slim Farley, who had been keeping close watch on Ricky Sloane's movements, suddenly appeared at the ranch and burst in on Larry, his eyes bright with excitement.

Larry, startled, asked quickly:

"What's up, Slim?"

"Doggoned if I know," Slim replied. "Ricky an' the hull bunch has left the ridge an' gone back to Briscoe. 'Pears like they'd give up, but the feller that guesses Ricky Sloane's quit is guessin' wrong. More like it's a trap. I reckon he figgers to coax you out where he can find you. You gotta git away from here, *pronto!*"

"That's just what I'll do," said Larry eagerly. "It's my chance to get to Castle Rock."

"Yeah—well, I'm goin' with you."

"All right," said Larry, already on his way to the door. "I want you to see what I do."

The sun was behind the ridge when Larry and Slim reined in their horses behind the towers of Castle Rock. Larry's first move on dismounting was to examine the ground. It was a place not easy of access and seldom visited. When he found comparatively fresh marks of a horse which, evidently, had stood there for some time, his eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

So far, Foster had not lied. He *had* been behind Castle Rock. Now to find out how much he could have seen.

Moving around the rock until he could look down the gorge, he found the very spot where Foster must have been standing. It was marked by the burnt stubs of his cigarettes.

"Slim, come here!" He cried excitedly. "Look down the gorge! I found Dick fifty yards beyond the bend. You'll allow nobody could see him from here."

"Not unless he could see through a hundred yards o' rock."

"Now look at that slide that shows over the point! He could see halfway down, but no further."

"Not from here he couldn't."

"Well, here's where he was hidin'. Look at those cigarette stubs on the ground! And he couldn't leave here without bein' seen from where I was workin' on the slide."

"That's a sure bet."

"Then Foster lied!" Larry's voice was breaking with excitement. "He saw me on the slide, all right, but he didn't see anythin' else. How did he know the mask was on Dick's face?"

"Mask on Dick! What in thunder are you talkin' about?"

Larry did not answer. He was staring down into the gorge, but he was seeing again the Masked Bandit dash away from the stage. It was up this gorge he had made his escape. Larry could now picture all the rest of the tragedy.

Racing up the trail, the masked man had come face to face with Dick Allison. Perhaps Dick had recognized him. Perhaps it was only the act of a desperate man who found his way of escape blocked. But Dick had been shot out of his saddle.

It was what followed that made Larry grit his teeth and brought a steely hardness to his eyes. His mind pictured the killer putting the black mask on the dead man's face, taking Dick's gun and replacing it with the one that had killed the sheriff, then leaving his own telltale red bay and riding away on Dick's horse. And that killer, he was now convinced, was Gil Foster.

Slim, who had been watching Larry's face, suddenly broke in on his brown study.

"Look-a-here!" he said. "If you don't want to make me plumb looney, tell me what it's all about."

"The mask was on Dick's face when I found him," Larry replied, "but it was Gil Foster who wore it when he held up the stage and killed the sheriff. It was Foster who killed Dick and then put the mask on him and changed guns. I was fool enough to let it take me in. I buried the mask on the slide, put my own gun in Dick's holster and took him home. You know the rest."

"Yeah," Slim snorted, "an' when that sidewinder said you was the Masked Bandit, you made a break and clinched it."

"But I couldn't tell Mrs. Allison that Dick was a thief," Larry defended himself.

"How much do you reckon you fooled her?" Slim asked contemptuously. "She ain't nobody's goat. Wa'n't your gun in Dick's holster, with your name plastered all over it? How's she gonna figger that out?"

"It makes it look all the worse for me," Larry admitted gloomily. "Now that I know the truth, I can tell her; but I can't prove a word of it."

"Ain't you found what you wanted up here?"

"Yes, I found proof enough for me; but Ricky Sloane would laugh at it. Foster told Jean the mask was on Dick. He couldn't know that unless he put it there. But suppose he denies sayin' it, or mebbe says that he was only bluffin' Jean and didn't know anythin' about the mask, except that he saw me buryin' it? How can I prove anythin'? If I'm the Masked Bandit, they'll all expect me to lie."

"How 'bout Dick's gun?" Slim suggested. "Everybody knows that shootin' iron. He'll have it put away some'ers at the ranch. If we could find it there, wouldn't *that* put the kibosh on him?"

"No chance, I'm afraid," said Larry, a grin for a moment breaking through his gloom. "Since my last visit to the Cross Circle I reckon it's about as safe for me as a den of hungry wolves."

"I dunno," said Slim. "Tonight I got a notion them wolves won't be to hum. I was talkin' to Shorty Means of the Forty-Four today, an' he was tellin' me all the boys of that outfit was goin' to a dance tonight at Briscoe. Foster's bunch ain't gonna miss nothin' like that. I'm bettin' we could walk right in to the Cross Circle tonight an' out ag'in, 'thout fallin' over anythin' that wears boots."

For a moment Larry's eyes sparkled as if he saw something very attractive in Slim's idea. Suddenly he sobered and his brows drew together in a frown.

"Did you say all the Forty-Four boys are goin' to the dance?" he asked sharply.

"That's what Shorty said, an' Shorty ain't no liar."

"Get on your horse, Slim. We're not goin' to the Cross Circle, but we're goin' to the Forty-Four as fast as we can travel."

"What's eatin' you now?"

"Why, everybody knows that Mrs. Allison sold her Hereford herd," Larry answered. "That money would be paid to her today after the stage got in, too late to bank it. Those two women will be alone with it tonight."

"Gosh! And I seen Gil Foster ridin' that way this afternoon!"

"Ride, Slim! Ride like hell!" Larry shouted. "I ain't waitin' for you."

He put spurs to Jerry and raced down the barren slopes at breakneck speed.

Slim rode, and rode hard, but in ten minutes Larry was out of sight, and he was riding alone.

VIII

As night closed in at the Forty-Four a curious stillness settled on the ranch. With the exception of the ranch house, the buildings became only black blots on a dark background. Horses, moving restlessly in the corral, made the only sounds that broke the dead silence.

Before sundown all six of the men who made up the Forty-Four outfit had taken the road to Briscoe at a run, in high glee at the thought of having a whole night for exploring the delights of the town. Only at the house was there a sign of life, lighted windows showing that the ranch was not entirely deserted.

Only a very keen eye could have detected

the man who stood by the corner of the silent bunkhouse, as motionless as the wall against which he leaned. His face, which was even blacker than the rest of his figure, was turned toward the house. Through slits in his mask, glittering eyes were watching the lighted windows.

There were two—one light shining from the living room, the other from the kitchen wing. Through the uncurtained kitchen window Jean Harper's head and shoulders could be plainly seen, bending over something with which her hands were busily engaged.

But it was on the other lighted window that the masked man concentrated his attention. No shadow crossed it. The unbroken, soft glow of that square patch on the dark wall seemed somehow to be a part of the general stillness of the ranch. A moment he watched it, then with swift, noiseless strides that told of moccasined feet, he crossed the dusty enclosure and the small lawn. Arrived at the house, he stole to the window and peered in.

Nothing could be more peaceful than the picture of that living room. Directly in front of him, by the lamp on the far side of the room, Mrs. Allison was seated in her favorite rocking chair. But her hands, usually so busy, had dropped onto her lap with her knitting. Her ball of yarn had fallen to the floor and rolled some distance away. Her eyes were closed, her head drooping, her whole body relaxed. She was sound asleep.

The masked man nodded his head with satisfaction. In the right-hand wall of the room a door, giving entrance from the hall, stood open. He noted it, then his gaze shifted across the room to a chest of drawers, and an added glitter came to the eyes behind the mask.

Apparently contented with what he saw, he moved swiftly to the front entrance. The door opened under his hand. Inch by inch he pushed it wide open and left it so. He had only a weak, sleeping old lady with whom to deal; but in the dark hall he drew two guns, and a moment later he was in the room.

The sleeping woman had not moved, but his eyes never left her as he stole across to the chest against the wall. Her steady, slow breathing seemed to reassure him. He holstered one gun, but put the other down on the flat top of the chest, as if to have it ready in an emergency.

Until now he had made no more noise than a prowling cat, but he had come to the most difficult part of his adventure. To pull open and search the drawers of the chest, one after the other, without making a noise, would be almost impossible. However, luck was with him. He began with the top drawer, pulling it out an inch at a time. The last pull produced a squeak that seemed loud enough to wake the dead, but before his eyes lay a large pile of bank notes, neatly tied in a bundle. To seize it and thrust it under his shirt was the work of a second; then he turned with his hand on his gun.

Mrs. Allison had not moved except to raise her head. But now her eyes were open and she was studying the masked robber with calm, searching scrutiny. A moment they faced each other in silence, then, where all had been so still, things began to happen with lightning-like rapidity.

Through the open doors came the clatter of a horse ridden at a furious pace. The sound galvanized the robber to sudden, swift action. Seeming to forget the gun he had laid down, he sprang to the door. Mrs. Allison did not speak nor move to stop him. Her eyes followed him without a change in their cool steadiness. But while he was yet a pace from the door, Jean Harper suddenly appeared in the opening.

For an instant the shock of surprise held them both rigid. Then Jean instinctively threw out her hands, grasping the sides of the doorway to prevent his escape. A muttered curse came from under the mask. The man seized her by the arm and hurled her behind him into the room. But as he would have rushed through the door, another figure sprang in front of him, and he found himself facing Larry Drake.

Larry had arrived in time to see the brutal handling of the girl he loved, and, as if something in his brain had snapped, he became a cyclone of raging fury. He forgot everything else in a mad lust to

punish the man who had done it. The masked man was reaching for his gun, but Larry's fist was far swifter and sent him staggering back into the room.

Larry followed up with a flying leap, and together they went to the floor with a crash that shook the house. Larry had a firm grip on the masked man's throat, and his one wild, fierce purpose was to choke the life out of him before the man could reach and draw the gun still in his belt. With only one free hand to prevent this, Larry's task was not easy.

The man was fighting with the strength of desperation. As they threshed about on the floor, crashing into the furniture, his greater weight and bulk began to tell. More than once he was on the point of reaching the gun, and was checked only in the nick of time.

How it would have ended no one can tell. Larry became vaguely conscious of a voice shouting curses at him, then he was seized by many hands and dragged from his hold.

The room had very suddenly filled with men, and it was Ricky Sloane who had taken the masked man's gun, and was putting handcuffs on his wrists.

Pulling the man to his feet, Ricky tore off the black mask, exposing the battered features of Gil Foster.

It was no surprise to Larry, but he heard the gasp that came from the men standing about him. Then Ricky Sloane was speaking. He was holding the bundle of bank notes in his hand.

"You sure guessed right, Mrs. Allison. I'll own up I figgered you was loco, but he can't prove no alibi for this!"

"I knew I was right," was Mrs. Allison's calm reply, "but we had to prove it. Take good care of him, Ricky. I want the man who killed my boy to hang!"

"Don't you worry!" Ricky assured her. "I ain't forgettin' he killed Dave Corby, one o' the best friends I ever had, an' I'll sure hang him if I have to do it without judge or jury!"

RICKY SLOANE and his men were gone to Briscoe with their prisoner. In the reaction of a great relief Jean had taken shelter in Larry's arms. Neither of them took notice of Mrs. Allison, who had placidly resumed her knitting and was smiling at them. Suddenly she spoke:

"I see that Foster left one of his guns behind him. Will you bring it to me, Jean?"

Jean sprang to obey, and the old lady, examining the gun, exclaimed with surprise:

"Why, this is your gun, Larry! Do you suppose he really forgot it, or did he mean to leave it?"

"I reckon he meant to leave it, all right," said Larry. "If he'd got away with the steal, I'd have had hard work to prove I didn't do it."

"But I wonder where he got it?"

"I must have left it somewheres."

"Are you sure you didn't leave it in Dick's belt?"

Larry's jaw dropped. His look of utter dismay brought a twinkle to Mrs. Allison's eyes.

"You foolish boy!" she said with a smile. "You thought my Dick was a thief and a killer, and to save me you took it on yourself. Did you think you could fool me? You ought to have known better. I knew it wasn't true of either one of you.

"Jean hasn't loved me very much the last few days, but I had to trap that smooth-tongued scoundrel or I would have lost you, too Now," she continued, her voice suddenly weary, "I think I'll go to bed."

There was sadness in the eyes of the two young people as their gaze followed her out of the room. But when they were alone—well, there was something else to think about.

Follow the Rodeos with Tex Sherman in every issue of RANCH ROMANCES beginning with the Second December Number.

Her Permanent Protector

By William Freeman Hough

Johnny was an expert shot, but he used his gun not to draw the blood of his fellow men, but because shooting was his hobby. Then he was offered a job as gunfighter—and there was a sweet and lovely girl begging him to take it.

JOHNNY HYMES, pausing for a moment on the tree-clad slope, caught just a glimpse of the tawny form as it slid silently into a thicket. Another man might have missed that brief flash of long, yellow body; but it was a part of Johnny's job to keep his eyes open.

Without a rustle of his leather chaps he dismounted, tied his horse to a slim vine maple and, under the cover of a thicket, worked cautiously upward toward a small bench fifty yards away. He guessed that there was a new calf nestled up there, and that the cougar was planning to dine. Johnny was a shrewd cowboy and knew the ways of the big cats that took such heavy toll in young calves. There was no question but that the cougar had seen him, watched him pass on down below the level of the bench; so, with the way clear, the animal was circling above to come into the clearing from the far side.

"The wind's in my favor," said Johnny to himself as he placed each foot carefully. "If I can just get there in time. . . ."

The sun was edging westward, its slanting rays feathering the tree-tops and spearing the thickets with long, golden shafts.

Behind, the deserted horse stood quietly, eyes fastened on its rider, ears pricked expectantly forward. Not a stone moved under Johnny's boots; not a twig snapped as he moved upward. Tragedy always struck during moments of deep silence. Johnny wondered if he would be in time; for cougars strike swiftly once they are set.

He reached the edge of the bench at last and raised his body behind the protecting trunk of a tall fir. With his hat off, he peered cautiously around the tree. What he saw so surprised him that he scraped his nose against the rough bark. The bench was only fifty feet in width and criss-crossed with down logs. At the far edge of the tangled maze stood a pack horse, head down, hips slumped in weariness. Further to the right stood a saddle pony, small muzzle testing the air, eyes searching the thicket beyond. Seated on the ground, back to a log and sound asleep, was a girl.

Johnny blinked and looked again. She was only a distance of thirty feet from him, near enough so that he could see the slow rise and fall of her bosom. One small hand lay beside her, palm upward; the spurs on her boots had propped her feet. Her leather riding-skirt had been deeply scratched in traversing thickets. One shoulder of her woolen blouse had been torn, exposing a bit of white flesh.

So engrossed in his discovery was Johnny, that he completely forgot the cougar until a yellow stem moved in the thicket behind the girl. It was the signal for the spring. Johnny stepped clear of the tree and whipped out his gun just as the big cat launched itself through the air. Johnny fired twice—lightning shots that crashed like thunder across the bench. Both bullets took effect, one smashing squarely into the opened mouth of the cougar. The animal died in mid-air, but the force of the leap carried it on to its objective. One hundred and sixty pounds of cougar struck the girl and bowled her over like a twig.

Johnny recorded that she did not scream. From a prone position she sprang erect, eyes wide in fright, face as white as the exposed shoulder and hands grasping vainly for some weapon. The pony plunged wildly, snagging itself up in a dead branch. The pack horse came alive with a snort and stood trembling, eyes fastened on the quivering form of the dead cougar.

In the deep silence that followed, the girl swept the bench with wide eyes. She saw Johnny standing near the tree, gun still in hand. Her mouth opened as though to speak, but no sound came forth. He nodded casually, and she directed her gaze to the cougar near her.

"Sort of unusual," said Johnny calmly. He holstered his gun and stepped forward. "Cougar cats never attack humans unless it's a child or—or somebody what looks to be right helpless. You were asleep, so I s'pose this one figgered on a change of grub." He stirred the animal with his foot. "H'mn; lady cat. Must have some kittens. Got hungry in a big way."

"Where—where did you come from?" was the girl's first words.

Johnny waved a vague hand. "Oh, just come down off'n the peaks. Been huntin' calves. Happened to see this cougar stalkin' somethin', so just took a look. Reckon she'd of mauled you bad."

"I—I guess so. Silly of me to fall asleep that way." She looked into his face and her eyes dropped, long lashes sweeping down over white skin. A shudder moved her shoulders. "It's hard to say anything," she murmured. "I thought at first it was Bert Frisbee—that is, the shooting made me think—scared me—" she faltered.

"Lost?" asked Johnny.

"Yes. Strangest thing. We've been up here many times, and yet today we got off the trail."

"Easy enough," he nodded. "Who's 'we'?"

"Oh, Grandfather and me. It must have been up yonder some place we lost the trail. He went back to try and pick it up."

A crashing of brush drew their attention. From back of the bench came a rider, rushing full tilt and calling loudly. They heard a horse grunt as it leaped a log, heard a scraping of lost stirrups; then an old man was beside them, face twitching with fear, blue-veined hands fumbling at an empty holster.

"You all right, Myrtle?" he gasped. "Who's this man? What were those shots? I thought—" Then he saw the dead cougar at her feet. "You—you shot it?" incredulously.

"No, Grandpa; this man killed it. I was asleep by a log. The cougar leaped at me."

Henry Breck looked at Johnny, and comprehension came to him. With trembling limbs he dismounted. His white goatee jerked spasmodically as he seized Johnny's hand. "Our gratitude, sir," he said. "I don't know the exact circumstances, but it appears you arrived just in time. When I heard those shots I thought that Bert—" He broke off to pump Johnny's hand again.

"Killin' these beasts is part of my job," said Johnny modestly. "I just happened along. Been up yonder lookin' for some of Weston's calves."

"Weston? Al Weston? Why, that's the place we were headed for! We come up here every summer to spend a week in the hills. You work for him, Mr. —"

"Hymes is the name. Johnny Hymes. Yeah, I work for Al."

"Then perhaps you'll be kind enough to guide us to his ranch."

"Sure," said Johnny. "Want me to skin out this cat for you, ma'am? Make a nice rug or somethin'."

"I never want to see that thing again," she replied. "To think how near I came to—" She shuddered.

Johnny gathered up her pony and the pack horse. Pointing the way off the bench, he stooped quickly to snip the ears from the cougar. He had quite a collection of ears from cats he had shot with his sixgun. A little later he joined them, swinging eastward until he came to a well marked trail.

"I'm surprised that a cougar would attack a person," said Henry Breck.

"I was tellin' the lady that it wasn't a usual happenin'. Them cats is canny, though. That one saw her asleep an' figgered to get her afore she could get into action. I'm goin' to find them kittens one of these days."

"Then I did look helpless lying there against the log?" asked the girl.

"Well, not to me," said Johnny. "You looked—well, right pretty, so sort of tuckered out an' all. Like a little girl lost in the woods."

Color flooded Myrtle Breck's face. "I guess that part is true."

"You made a wonderful shot," said her grandfather. "It must have been all of fifty feet. And the cougar in the air."

"Oh, I practice quite a bit."

As they rode on, the Brecks recovered their poise. It was revealed to Johnny that they owned a large ranch down in the valley and that Al Weston had, at one time, been the foreman for them. Since Al had married and acquired a small place of his own, they visited him each summer.

WHEN they arrived at Weston's place, Myrtle Breck became breathless again as she related to Mrs. Weston her narrow escape. Henry Breck was telling the same thing to his host, while two clean-faced youngsters clambered all over Johnny. Grinning, he fished out the two cougar ears and gave one to each; then he went on to the barn with the horses.

"That wasn't such fancy shootin'," said Al Weston to Henry Breck. "Johnny is a crack shot, an' a fast one. I reckon he burns more powder than any man in this country. Takes about all his wages to keep him supplied. Why, I've seen him throw up two rocks half the size of your fist, an' bust 'em both before they reached the ground."

Henry Breck considered this for a time, his eyes veiled by same half-formed impulse. Later on, at the table, he watched Johnny covertly, studying him, measuring him carefully. And still later on he held a quiet conference with Al Weston.

That week in the hills sped all too swiftly for Myrtle Breck. Johnny rode with her almost every day, showed her the best places to fish and camp. Once he whipped out his gun and fired into the lower limbs of a tree. Out tumbled a full-grown wildcat to land almost at her feet.

"They kill off the grouse," he explained. "These hills are full of such varmints."

His woods and plains lore seemed bound-

less. There was a quiet confidence about him that instilled a feeling of security she had never known before. Every move he made counted for something; he never lifted his voice or became excited; he was always ready to accede to her wishes and took particular pains to save her any distress. And at the end of that wonderful week Myrtle Breck found herself wondering if she could get along without him. She flushed at the thought, tried to put it from her, but in vain.

"Johnny," said Mrs. Weston one evening, when they were alone in the kitchen, "you've done something to Myrtle."

"Me?" said Johnny in genuine surprise.

"Yes; and don't act so innocent about it. Haven't you noticed how she watches you, looks at you all the time?"

"Ain't noticed in particular," he replied. "What you drivin' at?"

"Just this: A girl can't ride all week with a man such as you and not be—well, impressed. I know you're modest, Johnny; at the same time there's something about you that attracts a girl like Myrtle. I'm a woman; I know."

"But thunderation," he exclaimed, "I'm just a plain cowpoke! She's the owner—or will be some day—of a big valley spread."

"As if that made any difference," scoffed Mrs. Weston. "My dad owns a big ranch, too, and Al was just a foreman. That didn't stop us from loving each other."

"Look here," Johnny exploded, his face crimson. "There ain't no use of you talkin' along that line."

"But you like Myrtle, don't you?"

"Sure; I like her a heap."

"And she loves you."

"Like the devil she does! Why—"

"Don't get your bristles up, Johnny," warned Mrs. Weston. "You're a man who always faces facts. Better look these in the eye. It doesn't matter one bit that you two have known each other just a week. It doesn't matter—"

"Oh, Johnny," called Al Weston from the front porch. "Come here a minute."

Johnny, glad to escape the embarrassing conversation, went immediately. He found Myrtle, her grandfather and his boss waiting.

"Sit down," invited Weston. "Mr. Breck wants to talk with you."

Johnny, his face still red from the kitchen conversation with Mrs. Weston, shot a quick glance at the trio. Henry Breck had a serious expression on his face; Al was somewhat concerned also; but Myrtle was smiling, and Johnny had always been secretly entranced by the dimples in her cheeks when she smiled. He sat down, reaching for the makings of a cigarette.

"How would you like to work for me?" began Breck.

Johnny looked into the faded eyes of the old man. "Why," he temporized, "I'm workin' for Al—that is, unless he's through with me."

"It isn't that," Breck assured. "Al knows you're a good hand. He knows that I can pay you more than he can afford. He knows that I need you."

Johnny felt Myrtle's eager gaze upon him. Was this, then, to be something in the nature of a reward for saving her life? He didn't want to think they owed him anything for that! "Punchers scarce down your way?" he asked.

"Not at all; plenty of them." Breck cleared his throat. "But men like you are few and far between, Johnny. I mean men who can handle a gun like you do."

Johnny stiffened slightly. Myrtle's smile had become rather fixed; Al Weston had leaned forward.

"You wouldn't have to ride, to work stock," Breck pursued. "You'd stay right near us all the time." He rubbed his thin, blue-veined hands together. "You see, Johnny we need protection."

"From what?" asked Johnny shortly.

"From Bert Frisbee."

Johnny's mind flickered back to that day up on the bench, recalling that Myrtle, in her first fright, had said something about being afraid Bert Frisbee had come. "Who is this gent, an' what's he done?" he inquired.

"Frisbee is a squatter," said Breck. "He's homesteaded a place along the west

boundary of my range. He's making trouble for us, threatening us."

"Well, what's the matter with your reg'lar riders?" Johnny wanted to know. "Can't they handle a squatter?"

"You don't understand," said Breck patiently. "Bert Frisbee is a killer. He's already shot one man to death and threatened Myrtle and me with the same fate. My regular riders are not—well, not suited to cope with such a man. You, being so handy with a gun, would have more influence, more weight."

Johnny got stiffly to his feet. "I'm not a gunman, Mr. Breck. I like to shoot, but I don't yearn for no man's blood."

"Take it easy, Johnny," soothed Al Weston. "I've told Mr. Breck the same thing. It's quite likely you won't ever have to shoot at Frisbee; the fact that you're a crack shot will probably be sufficient. When the word gets around—"

"I'll be a marked man for the rest of my life," declared Johnny.

The girl stepped forward and layed a hand on his arm. "Will you listen to me, Johnny? Please?" And, as his features softened, "Frisbee has the wrong idea about us. We're not against him, just because he's a squatter and represents a class all ranchers hate. Some of our stock broke through the fence and got into his garden. We offered to pay for the damage. He sent word that if we ever came near his place, he'd shoot the daylights out of us. If any of our cattle get near his fence, they're shot down.

"In addition, he sends us notes saying that we are the kind that make it tough for a small man to live; that we represent a class of rich ranchers that will some day be wiped out. He insists that we move all our stock from the west range or he'll come over and kill us."

"That sounds like the man was crazy," said Johnny. "Why don't the law take him in hand?"

"I've reported it to the sheriff," said Henry Breck, "but he can do nothing until we have some actual proof. Nobody has ever seen Frisbee shoot a single head of our stock, and the notes he sent are unsigned. While I believe the man is demented, it doesn't make me feel any easier about his threats. In fact, I think his mental condition makes him more dangerous.

"It's a peculiar situation, Johnny, I grant you that. But it is nerve-wracking, nevertheless. Myrtle and I live in actual fear of our lives. I'm an old man, can't do the things I used to, or I wouldn't be asking you to help us. The other day, when I heard the shooting up there in the hills, I was paralyzed with fear. I thought Frisbee had followed us up here and—and—" He wiped a fine dew of moisture from his forehead.

"Is it asking too much of you, Johnny?" whispered the girl, gazing up into his face.

Something more than compassion stirred Johnny Hymes. He didn't stop to analyze what it was, though he was extremely conscious of the girl's nearness. After all, who could be more entitled to his shooting talents than this fresh-faced, happy-hearted girl who had been his steady companion for the past week? And if it were true what Mrs. Weston had just said—that she loved him—why—. His pulse began to pound.

"All right," he said abruptly. "I'll go."

"Good!" Henry Breck heaved a sigh of relief. "We'll start in the morning."

DURING the next day and a half Johnny learned more of the existing conditions in the valley. He pieced every fragment of information together and tried to make a whole picture from them. But taking everything into account, there was still something wrong. There was one sound, substantial thing he could tie to; that was that the Brecks certainly needed a brand of help they couldn't find in their own employees. And, as they all rode on toward the Boxed B, he could not help but feel the change that had come over the old man and Myrtle. It seemed that a burden had been lifted from their shoulders.

Henry Breck actually supported two establishments on the ranch. All the help lived in quarters nearly a mile from the home ranch. There were the main corrals, the bunkhouse, cook shack and barns. The old place, where the main ranch house stood, offered more seclusion for the old man and

his granddaughter. Apparently Henry Breck could well afford such an arrangement.

Johnny hadn't been on the ranch half a day until his status was well known. Lem Tobert, the Boxed B foreman, rode over from the work quarters to report more cattle killed and, in meeting Johnny, was informed the reason for his presence. Tobert surveyed the new hand carefully, noted his build and calm demeanor.

"A good move," he approved. "Mebbe this will bring that jasper to his right senses. If it don't, then I'd advise that Hymes be sent over to the squatter's place to settle the thing."

Myrtle Breck shook her head. "We're not looking for more trouble, Lem. Johnny will stay right here at the old place with us. It's up to you and the other boys to protect our stock."

"We don't seem to have no luck that way," grumbled the foreman. "When we set up a guard, there ain't no shootin' done. Besides, the boys ain't keen on patrolin' that fence when they never know when Frisbee will let fly at 'em with his gun."

"Ever see the man shoot?" asked Johnny.

"No, I ain't," said Tobert with some defiance. "But he killed a man once in cold blood. They say he's got a turrible temper an' flies off'n the handle at the drop of a hat. We're punchers, Hymes, not gunfighters."

Johnny struggled to keep the blood from his face. The insinuation was only too plain, and it irked him.

In the days that followed, he rode the nearer confines of the ranch with Myrtle, experiencing a certain pride that she seemed perfectly happy and safe in his company; and the only danger he sensed was a persistent tugging at his heart-strings when in her company. He was beginning to believe that he hadn't been quite truthful with Mrs. Weston. He had said he liked Myrtle a heap, but now he wasn't at all sure that "like" was the proper word.

On the fourth day of his stay a hand appeared at the old ranch bearing a missive which he said had been found tied to the horn of a dead steer. Henry Breck read the note and then passed it on to Johnny. It read:

> "You Brecks—
>
> I hear as how you've done hired a gunfighter. That suits me. Send him over and we'll see how good he is. They ain't no jasper in this country what can scare me. The day is past when big ranchers can hire their dirty work done. I'm waiting fer him.
>
> You Know Who."

Johnny read the note through twice, a grin spreading over his lips. When he looked up it was to see Myrtle eying him anxiously. Henry Breck's goatee was bobbing nervously.

"You won't go, Johnny?" pleaded the girl.

"I don't see any sense in playin' right into his hand," he returned. "What he wants is for us to start the fight. No, I'll stay here."

"I'm relieved," said Breck. "I thought the message might stir you up."

Johnny shook his head. "Like I said, Mr. Breck, I'm no gunfighter. You wanted protection here, an' that's what I aim to give. If this gent comes over here lookin' for trouble—well, that's a different thing."

He turned his attention back to the note. It was written on coarse wrapping-paper, printed out in round, awkward characters. He studied the thing carefully, wondering if in this crude writing he might not get some clue that would guide him in case he did have a conflict with the man. While it isn't always proved to be a fact, it is generally known that a man who handles a gun steadily has a certain smoothness to his writing, no matter the limit of his education. An arm that can swing a gun into swift, sure action must, of necessity, do other things in the same way. Johnny noted that this crude bit of printing was anything but smooth. No flexible fingers had scrawled out that warning.

"Do you happen to know," he asked of the Brecks, "who the party was that Frisbee killed?"

"We know nothing about it," the rancher replied. "It didn't happen in this county. It is said that Frisbee never served any time in prison for it, though."

Two days later Lem Tobert came to the ranch flushed with anger. "He shot my best hoss," he announced. "I found the bronc anyhow a hundred yards from the fence. Now, I want to know what you're goin' to do about it, Boss! You got a man hired to stop this thing, so why not set him at it?"

"Did you see the hoss shot?" asked Johnny.

"No. It was durin' the night."

"Your own personal mount, I take it."

"Sure was."

"Then why don't you look after the matter yourself? Trot right over to Frisbee an' tell him about it."

"That's your job, Hymes. I got other things to do."

"It ain't my job. If it was my hoss he killed, though, I'd sure tangle with him about it."

"You talk big," snorted the foreman, "but you don't know Frisbee."

"I'm beginnin' to believe you're scared of him," said Johnny.

Lem Tobert's face went red and then white. Johnny caught a momentary glint of real fear in his eyes.

"Frisbee is a real killer," stuttered Tobert. "I ain't."

"A man could guess that," said Johnny. "However, it's always been the rule where I come from for every man to kill his own snakes."

"I ain't heard you braggin' about the reptiles you've killed," snorted the foreman whose temper was rising. "You come here all tagged as a crack shot, but I ain't seen you prove it none."

"A man," said Johnny, "who's dead sure he can perform good at the right time, don't have to prove it by makin' exhibitions."

"I think," broke in Henry Breck, "that you'd better get back to work, Lem. This is getting us no place."

"I've never seen Lem so upset," mused Myrtle as the foreman rode swiftly out of the yard.

"He's just as clear as a mountain stream," said Johnny with a grin. "O' course he's tired of this cattle killin' an' the danger he runs all the time. He was right tickled to see me here at the ranch. Now, he wants to crowd the thing to a finish; wants to barge me over to the squatter's place to start a finishin' rumpus. I don't bite at such bait."

IT was the next Saturday that the Brecks and Johnny rode into town for a few supplies. Logan's one street was lined with buckboards and saddle horses; the sidewalks were filled with folks who had come in to shop and swap gossip. Before the trio had passed the length of a square many eyes were focused on them, particularly on Johnny. The grapevine had carried its freight of latest news. Here was the gunman the Brecks had hired. Johnny had been right; he was a marked man!

"I'm—I'm sorry, Johnny," whispered Myrtle as they rode by a silent group who watched their passing. "I didn't realize how truthfully you spoke."

"Forget it," he said, furnishing a smile not only for her but for the curious ones.

"I'll never forget," she replied. "You're doing this for me, for us."

"Then I guess I can stand the gawkin'. Looks never busted any man's bones. 'Course, if any of these curious gents wants to test me out—well, that'll be different. Reckon I ought to shoot a few holes in some of these street signs, just to set their heads to waggin'?"

The girl chuckled, put at ease by his banter. And as they moved on down the street she drew her horse nearer to his and lifted her chin defiantly. Let them think what they liked. She knew Johnny for what he really was, and that was all that mattered.

But Johnny found the rest of the going not to his liking. It was his job to stay close to the Brecks, and his constant attendance began to draw even more attention. There was nothing hostile in the attitude of those who watched and furtively made comment. Yet Johnny had always been a free agent, moving when and where he pleased, mingling with his kind and finding interests in common with them. This new job set him apart as something untouchable.

The sun was lowering when the Brecks made ready to leave town. Standing before the general store, they waited while Johnny brought up the horses from a nearby rack. When he joined them, he saw that both were gazing at something across the street. Following their glance, Johnny saw a tall, dark man loading some groceries into a buckboard.

"Frisbee!" whispered Myrtle. "I didn't know he was in town."

A hush followed her announcement. Johnny became conscious that many eyes were fastened on him and upon the man across the street. The burden of observation had been steadily growing more irksome, and this last straw chafed deeply. People were expecting him to do something, make some move. They were waiting, waiting for a hostile move that would break into a full storm. Johnny handed the reins of the horses to the girl, stepped into the street and strode toward the buckboard.

Bert Frisbee glanced over his shoulder, saw him coming, and dropped a sack of flour into the bottom of the vehicle. His face turned dark as he squared about, eyes leveled, lips thinned to a straight line.

"You're Frisbee," stated Johnny, coming to a halt before the man.

"Yeah. An' you're Hymes, the gunman the Brecks have hired, I know you. Seen you several times today. Well?"

"I just wanted to inquire about some things," said Johnny easily.

"For instance?"

"Why didn't you let the Brecks settle for the damage their stock had done to your garden?"

"I don't want no truck with the Brecks. Ranchers like them make it tough for a man to make a livin'. I'm just a squatter."

Johnny nodded. "But why shoot their stock so long as it stays on the Boxed B range?"

"I've never shot a head of Breck's stock. Whoever says I have, lies!"

Johnny's brows arched in surprise. "Nor hosses either?"

"Not a hoss! They're just sayin' I done it so they'll have an excuse to drive me out. But I ain't goin', Hymes. You nor no other gun-toter can drive me out. It's my land, an' I aim to keep it."

The man was speaking directly and with force. There was an honest ring in his voice.

"Don't get me wrong, Frisbee; I ain't got any intentions of runnin' you out. But let me tally somethin' in your head: If you don't quit sendin' threatenin' notes to the Brecks, I'll take it on myself to stop you. You may be a killer, have a notch on your gun-butt, but that don't scare me one bit."

"I never killed but one man!" said Frisbee hoarsely. "That was self-defense. I proved it in court, an' they let me go. As for notes, I don't know what you're talkin' about. I've never sent any sort of word to Henry Breck. I only told his foreman once if the Boxed B cattle wasn't kept out of my garden, which same means a heap to me this comin' winter, I'd shoot 'em down an' use 'em for meat."

Johnny shifted to one hip. "I believe you're makin' straight talk, Frisbee. Who's the lady just behind you?"

A rumbling sound came from the tall man's throat. A white line crept across his forehead and down each side of his face. He wasn't to be tricked by turning his head. But a form did brush his shoulder and an anxious voice sounded in his ears.

"What is it, Bert? Is there trouble of some kind?"

"Mary, you'd better get back. This fella is the gent the Brecks hired."

"Stay where you are, ma'am," said Johnny. He saw that the woman held a bundle close in her arms, a bundle of baby blankets. "There'll be no trouble. You, Frisbee, might help your wife up to the buggy seat." Frisbee half turned, placed a hand under his wife's arm and lifted. There was still a pinched-out look to his features. While he stood beside the front wheel, Johnny advanced, lifted himself on his toes to peer into the bundle the woman held. She gazed at him, read something in his face and did not shrink away.

"What's its name?" asked Johnny softly.

"Bert," she replied. "Bert Junior."

"Boy, eh? I like kids. Cute little tike, ain't he? Bet he'll be gettin' hungry after bit. Mebbe you'd better roll along toward the diggin's."

Frisbee's expression had changed abruptly. Climbing into the driver's seat, he leaned down. "You're a white man, Hymes," he said fervently. "I figgered I'd have to make a fight with you. It worried me a heap."

"Forget that," Johnny advised. "You 'n' me ain't got any fight. By the way, what was the name of the man you killed?"

"Taggart," said Frisbee, picking up the reins.

And thus ended as it began the interview so filled with disastrous possibilities. The people along the street were stunned; they had expected the two men, tagged as killers, to shoot it out. Instead, they had conversed briefly and parted.

Johnny crossed the street with a faint smile lingering about his lips. He nodded toward the horses, swung into the saddle and waited while the Brecks did likewise. Then they moved off and disappeared.

Henry Breck and Myrtle were both relieved and puzzled. Silently they rode along, respecting a strange mood that seemed to have gripped Johnny. He offered no explanations and, as they trusted him, they asked none. Myrtle was quite sure in her own mind that he had acted wisely.

Once home, the conversation became as casual as though Frisbee had not been seen. But at a late hour Myrtle lifted inquiring eyes as Johnny got up from his porch chair and moved off in the darkness. She heard him moving about the barn, heard him speak to his horse. A few moments later hoofs pounded out across the yard. He was gone,

"He's up to something," she said to herself as the sound died in the distance. "Did he make arrangements to meet Frisbee tonight? It would be like Johnny to settle this thing in some quiet spot away from curious eyes."

Knowing she would never sleep until he returned, she held her place on the porch until that black, solemn hour just before dawn. It was then that she heard shuffling hoofs out beyond the barn, and her tense nerves relaxed.

He came on to the house, would have passed her there in the darkness had she not risen quickly and grasped his arm. "Johnny! It's—it's all over? I've been waiting!"

"You should've gone to bed," he reprimanded softly.

"But I couldn't, knowing you had gone out to—to— Tell me!"

"Well, it ain't all over, yet. Tomorrow mornin' will prove somethin', I think. I've done a bit of cruisin' aroun' an' found out some things I been wonderin' about."

There came a brief silence; then, "Johnny, I'm so glad nothing happened this afternoon. I'd heard that there was a Mrs. Frisbee, but I had pictured her as a hard woman like her husband. I was wrong. She seemed so worried there by the buckboard. And didn't she have a baby in her arms?"

"A cute little rascal," said Johnny. "They named him after his pa."

"Then no matter what happens Bert Frisbee must not be harmed. Promise me, Johnny?"

"Sure."

"It may sound silly to you after what he's done, but—"

"Nothin' is silly, honey, when it concerns helpless kids."

"Wh-what did you say?"

"I said—aw, shucks, that just slipped out."

There came a breathless moment of hesitation in which the darkness blotted out the reflected emotions on their features.

"I'll say it again," whispered Johnny hoarsely. "Honey!"

"Oh, Johnny!" And she was in his arms.

DAWN found them still on the porch, wrapped in a nameless ecstasy. But, as Henry Breck stirred inside the house, the spell was broken. Myrtle passed on in to prepare breakfast; Johnny went down to the barn to saddle three horses.

The morning sun was hot, the air oppressive as Johnny led them from the ranch. Henry Breck was frankly puzzled by the early and unexplained ride. Myrtle

did not care to learn its purpose; the fact that Johnny led the way was quite enough.

They came to the section of the ranch where the help lived and found the Boxed B riders indulging in a Sunday morning's laziness. Lem Tobert sat before the long bunkhouse smoking a cigarette. At the sight of the visitors he grabbed for a shirt, pulled it on and came forward to meet them, surprise on his dark features.

"Somethin' wrong?" he questioned, searching them with careful eyes.

"I just wanted to tell you, Tobert, that I met Frisbee yesterday," said Johnny.

"Met Frisbee! Then it's all over?" The foreman's voice was husky with eagerness.

"We'll never be bothered by the man," Johnny assured him.

"Good! That's good. He had it comin', the killer! Just how did it happen?"

"Tobert," said Johnny, ignoring the question, "just what is your right name? Couldn't be Taggart, could it?"

The foreman's jaw dropped and he sank back a step. "What you talkin' about?" he demanded.

"Last night I looked over your saddle," said Johnny, still ignoring the man's questions. "I found some initials branded back of the cantle. They were 'L.S.T.'"

"Lem Samuel Tobert," said the foreman.

"You mean Lou Samuel Taggart," Johnny shot out. "You're a brother to Lafe Taggart, the man Frisbee killed in self-defense."

"What's—what's this?" faltered Henry Breck, whereupon his granddaughter motioned to him for silence.

"I heard about the Taggart brothers some years ago," went on Johnny. "It wasn't particular nice news either—somethin' about some rustlin'. One of the brothers was caught an' killed. I never heard who the man was that caught him, but yesterday I learned. It was Bert Frisbee, who wasn't a squatter at that time."

"You're a liar!" spat Tobert, his face a mask of fury and fear.

"You," pursued Johnny relentlessly, "didn't have nerve enough to meet Frisbee yourself. I heard how you came home to find your brother killed an' how you swore to get the man. But you didn't. After they turned Frisbee loose, you got out of the country. I reckon he never saw you, else he would have recognized you workin' here on this ranch.

"So, for revenge, you try to frame this deal on him, hopin' that folks aroun' here would run him out or string him up. You didn't have the guts to face it out with him. You're as yellow as river mud. You're a sneak an' a double-crosser. You killed Breck's stock an' layed it onto the squatter. You even killed your own hoss an' blamed him for it. You took threatenin' notes to the Brecks, writ by yourself. They was printed a whole lot like them initials are branded on your saddle."

"Johnny," said Henry Breck, thoroughly astonished, "is this true?"

"As true as I'm alive, Mr. Breck."

"Then," turning upon his foreman, "you'll get off of this ranch immediately. And stay off!" The veins on the old man's neck began to bulge alarmingly.

"It ain't so easy as that," Johnny declared. "This man has spread tales an' thrown suspicion on a plumb honest man. That's got to be fixed up, in court. Get your stuff together, Tobert, 'cause we're headin' for town."

Defiance had fled the foreman. He turned from them quickly, to hide his attack of weakness. Passing into the bunkhouse, he gathered up his belongings while the men he had bossed stared at him curiously. Emerging presently, he made his way to the barn, saddled his horse and led it forth. And it was then, with a means of escape at hand, that he mustered up a desperate courage.

The saddled horse stood broadside to those who waited in the yard—ample protection. Tobert slid his gun from its holster, eyed Johnny across the intervening distance, and tensed. With lips tucked back, he swung the gun up over the seat of the saddle and pulled the trigger. Even as the brim of his hat jerked, Johnny pulled and fired.

The first shot scooped the foreman's gun from the saddle seat and sent it spinning

backward. The second, so close that it blended with the first, struck an upflung hand and bored cleanly through the palm. The third smashed into an exposed knee beneath the horse's belly. It was all done so swiftly that the saddled mount had no chance to move. Tobert sagged to the ground, eyes wide in fear and astonishment.

"Johnny!" gasped the girl. She had never seen him shoot like this before, not even when he had roamed the upper hills with her.

"Steady!" he cautioned. His eyes had shifted to a figure emerging from behind the barn. "I told you not to come," he called to Bert Frisbee, who was advancing with long, swift strides.

"Couldn't stay away, Hymes," said the squatter, his face lighted by admiration. "I just had to see this buzzard get his. An' I got to say that it was worth the risk I took. Man, that was shootin'!"

"How long have you been here?" asked Johnny.

"Since before daylight. I come over soon after you left my place." He spread his hands from his hips. "I didn't bring a gun," he pointed out.

"Then I'll let you use mine," said Johnny.

"Don't want it, Hymes. Taggart has had his lesson. I don't aim to finish him off."

"I wouldn't let you do that," checked Johnny. "What I mean is, you'd better have a gun just in case somethin' happened on the way to town."

"Town?" echoed the squatter.

"Sure! So long as you are here, you might as well herd this gent into Logan an' turn him over to the sheriff. I don't know who's got a better right, do you?"

An expression of satisfaction marked Frisbee's face. "Good idee!" he approved. "Be right happy to do that. It'll sort of set me right with the folks in this neighborhood."

Henry Breck's foreman was the picture of abject misery and despair as, guarded by Frisbee, he rode from the ranch. Johnny had judged the man right; there wasn't an ounce of real courage in his whole body. And Henry Breck, his mind occupied by the revelation and sudden turn of events, rode slowly off toward the home ranch, forgetting, apparently, the other two who had ridden out with him that morning. But they were following on after him at an even slower pace.

"Johnny," said Myrtle, reaching into the front of her blouse, "I have something here I think you should see." She drew out a crumpled bit of paper.

"Not another note!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Mrs. Weston gave it to me just before we left her place to come down here. She told me not to read it until—well—"

"Well?" he echoed.

"So I opened and read it this morning," she said, flushing warmly. "It says that we're invited to spend our honeymoon at the Weston ranch up in the hills."

"Doggone!" breathed Johnny. "She sure had this thing figgered out right. Sure, that suits me, honey. I know of some swell places to camp an' fish. Then there's those cougar kittens to find."

"Oh, Johnny, just we two," said Myrtle rapturously.

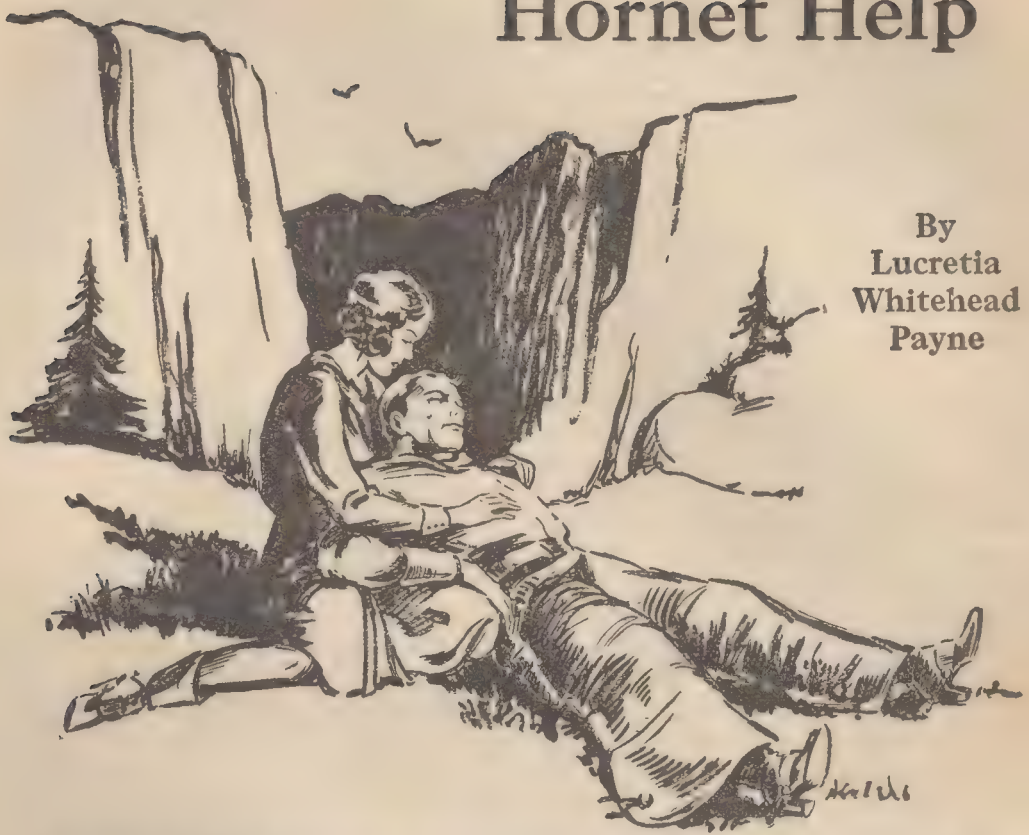
"Just us two," he nodded. "But just so your granddad won't get lonesome, we'll take him along to stop off at Al's. Mebbe he'll want Al to come back an' be foreman again. Weston ain't doin' so good up yonder, I happen to know. We could use his place then for a summer camp. Later on—well, mebbe we'd better wait an' see about the rest of the things I had in mind."

"Anything you say, Johnny." She leaned over to hide her flushed face against his breast. "I know what you were thinking about," she whispered.

"Yeah? Well, it wasn't cougar kittens," he said softly.

Hornet Help

By Lucretia Whitehead Payne



If she were his little sister, the big, broad-shouldered stranger said, she'd learn to do as she was told. But what he told her to do, before another day had passed, was to love him, forever!

AS she bent forward in her saddle to stroke the arching neck of the slim black horse, Zanna Hale looked very small and child-like. Not that Zanna felt small or child-like, even though she could not quite balance a hundred-pound sack of feed on the old pair of butcher's steelyards, and must stand on tiptoe to put a bridle on any full-grown horse. She felt as large and capable as her splendid sister Kate, who so efficiently ran the Hales' big Tri-Star Ranch.

"You're no fire-eater, are you, War Dance?" laughed the girl as she tore out of the stable yard atop the new horse. She had been forbidden to ride the animal until 'Dobe Bill, lank and pessimistic, had had opportunity to try him out and learn his tricks. "You won't blow up, will you? 'Dobe shouldn't have gone to Blue Rock this afternoon, if he had to give you a workout," went on Zanna wickedly, wrinkling her pretty nose and tossing her head, with its sleek cap of raven-wing hair. Her dark eyes snapped as she thought of a squelching retort for 'Dobe, in case he scolded.

Everybody, including the melancholy 'Dobe, admitted Zanna could ride almost any horse, and now she felt like a bird, skimming swiftly and easily over the hard-packed trail. Since she was joint owner of the Tri-Star and all it contained, she felt she had a right to ride War Dance. Kate just got nervous, feeling too responsible for Zanna, whose vacations from boarding school were a wild delight to the girl.

"We'll cross the highway," sang Zanna, her smooth brown cheeks flushed pink with the exhilaration of the ride. "Oh, a car!

I wonder if it's from town. Maybe someone we know."

The girl reined War Dance close to the fence, watching with interest the big green car tearing up the smooth road which stretched, ribbon-like, into the rolling hills ahead. She would like to see her friends, but no car had charms to compare with War Dance. As the green streak shot past, its siren screamed with an ear-splitting shrillness, and in a fraction of a second another streak, black and long-legged, was pounding back across the meadow, away from that hellish noise.

War Dance's sudden bolt almost jerked Zanna from her saddle, and, as the horse tore on with no slackening of speed, she was unable to regain her left stirrup. Furious with her mount for acting so "darned unreasonable," the girl tugged on the reins as hard as she could, considering that she was pulling leather like a rank amateur.

"Whoa, War Dance! Whoa!" she cried. "Stop, you beast! Oh, why didn't I guess you had a mouth like iron and a will as strong as mine?" she gasped, as the scenery went whizzing past, rather in the fashion of a moving picture. "What will happen if I can't stop you, you fire-eater?"

As unexpectedly as he had first wheeled, the black made another right-about, and streaked for a clump of thick, close-growing jack pines on a nearby hill. If he got into these, Zanna would be torn out of the saddle, badly scratched and perhaps killed. Yet she could not stop the runaway!

The girl had almost decided to loosen her convulsive grip on reins and horn, and roll off of her unmanageable mount out here in the open, when she heard other hoofs racing up from behind. At the sound of pursuit, War Dance increased his speed. Nevertheless, a dark bay horse suddenly surged alongside, a long arm shot out, and strong brown fingers grasped bridle and cheek strap, pulling the runaway to a stop.

Zanna, still clinging desperately to her saddle horn, her eyes fastened in horror on the dense jack pines ahead, did not even glance at her rescuer, until she heard a deep voice asking in displeasure:

"What could any parents be thinkin' of, to let a child like you ride such a cold-jawed brute? You might 'a' been killed."

With the words, the man reached over and drew Zanna up on his own horse. Disgusted and angry, and a good deal shaken by her experience, Zanna burst into wild sobs, and buried her face on the stranger's muscular shoulder.

"I — can — ride — better'n — you!" she gasped. "I—it—w-was that d-damned c-ar set—War Dance—off! H-he's a g-grand horse! I c-can ride—anything!"

"Might be all right for a man," returned the other in what sounded to Zanna a vastly superior tone. "But not for a little girl. You are a little girl, aren't you? Thought first you were a boy."

"You're just insulting!" flashed Zanna, her tears drying on her hot cheeks as she sat up and pulled away from the arm which held her. She looked defiantly into a sunburned face, with a serious mouth, and deep blue, serious eyes, and went on, "I'm Zanna Hale, one of the best riders in Colorado! If War Dance hadn't blown up—"

"Then you're from the Tri-Star! I'm on my way there, so I'll take you back—fortunately whole."

Zanna threw back her head in a most imperious gesture, and ordered in her frostiest manner, "Put me back on my horse *at once!* I don't have to be carried home."

The man laughed amusedly, his straight lips opening over even white teeth, his blue eyes showing little glints of humor. However, he merely shook his head and chirruped to his bay, which struck into a fast trot, imitated by War Dance, leading alongside.

Zanna could scarcely believe her senses. This stranger carrying her! After she had ordered him to put her back on War Dance! She was furious. Turning in the powerful arm which held her, she seized a handful of tawny hair in her strong little fingers and pulled viciously, rejoicing to see tears start in the blue eyes. Then her hand was jerked loose and she was turned face-downward across the saddle, her head supported on the rider's knee so she would not jolt dizzily.

"What a bad-tempered kid!" remarked the cool, deep voice. "Always want your own way, do you? If you were my little sister, you'd learn to do like you're told."

Though nearly choked by varied emotions, Zanna managed to say between clenched teeth, "Thank heaven I'm not your sister, or in the least related to you!" and lapsed into silence.

As the bay horse came within sight of the Tri-Star ranch buildings, the stranger halted, lifted Zanna carefully to the saddle on War Dance, and remarked casually:

"I reckon you can ride the rest o' the way without gettin' killed, since I'm here to stop that black brute if he tries to bolt."

Were glances daggers, the one Zanna flashed at the speaker would have killed him instantly. But he appeared not to notice, and Zanna shot ahead to the stables. There she found 'Dobe Bill, perched on a top corral pole, whittling a plug of tobacco.

Turning his mouse-colored head on its long, scrawny neck, 'Dobe stuffed his plug into a rear overalls' pocket, and remarked in a melancholy drawl:

"Done tol' Miz Kate as how you'd fork War Dance iffen us two turned our backs. Here was your sister so busy she couldn't watch, an' me away. Howcome you got home in one piece? I'd 'a' bet with Miz Kate iffen she—"

" 'Dobe," Zanna broke in, "do you know who that is?" indicating the stranger riding toward the house.

'Dobe squinted, his jaws going through motions which were an excellent imitation of a cud-chewing sheep. He raised his dilapidated hat, scratched his mousey hair, and remarked:

"Reckon that's the feller Miz Kate was 'spectin' to look at the place. Name's Fuller, er somethin'. Owns a whoppin' big outfit 'long the New Mex line, but hankers to git 'nother up thisaway, Miz Kate sez. Summer feed problem."

Zanna's heart grew cold and almost stopped. "Come to look at our ranch? You mean my sister's thinking of selling!"

"Uh! Guess I let the cat outa the bag. Miz Kate's hell-bent to—I mean, she's fed up plenty on tryin' to run this layout. Figgers she's got to sell, but knowed you'd—"

Her mind in a tumult, the girl slid to the ground and ran to the house. Something had been going on without her knowing it. She, Zanna Hale, was half-owner of the Tri-Star. Kate couldn't dispose of the ranch without her consent, and she would never consent! Why, even now she could take over the management of the ranch, so Kate could rest. This was where Zanna was born. It was where she intended to die.

At the door of Kate's office the girl hesitated. Should she go in now to confront this insulting stranger who had carried her across his horse like a lost dogie calf, or should she change to one of her prettiest dresses and show him she was grown up? But he might leave before she could do this; so, holding her sleek, dark head high and making the most of her abbreviated inches, she pushed open the door.

For an instant she looked at her fine, honest sister, whose graying hair and worn, sweet face attested to strenuous years in making the Tri-Star the splendid proposition it had become. She did not glance at the other occupant of the room.

"Come in, Zanna dear," said Kate, warm affection in her voice and expressive dark eyes. "This is Mr. Brice Fuller, who wants to buy a ranch in this neighborhood —perhaps ours. Of course, we'll have to talk it all over, and you must agree, too. . . . Somehow, I don't seem as strong as I was. . . . Mr. Fuller," turning to her visitor, "this is my little sister, Zanna. It will be hard to persuade her to sell our home."

Brice Fuller merely bowed, his fine blue eyes enigmatical, a half-smile touching the corners of his serious mouth. Nor did the girl speak to him, as she exclaimed to her sister:

"I'm going to take charge of everything, Kate dear! I never guessed you were getting all worn out. Everything always goes so smoothly. Let me manage the Tri-Star. Then you can get away and rest."

"Manage the ranch all alone?" asked Kate with a fond smile. "I'm sure Mr. Fuller could tell you that would be a big job."

"Why ask him?" retorted Zanna with a

withering glance. "I expect he wouldn't approve of anything I'd do!"

"Probably not," returned the man coolly. "I always did reckon a person oughter be big 'nough for his job," with an appraising glance at the diminutive Zanna, which made her quite sure that she hated him.

"Since you're dressed for riding," hastily put in Kate, sensing something wrong in the attitude of the two, "won't you show Mr. Fuller the way to the T I? I've been out so much lately I'm behind with my work."

"Perhaps Mr. Fuller would prefer not to ride with me," began Zanna with cold hostility. But Brice interrupted:

"I'll like it heaps to ride with you, Miss Zanna." Then, ignoring the flash in the girl's dark eyes, he turned to her sister. "Thank you, Miss Kate, for answerin' my questions, though you won't say you'll sell your ranch. I'll look at some others, like you suggest, but I know when I'm suited."

"Remember, it takes two of us to agree to your terms," said Zanna icily, a minute later, trying hard to keep up with her companion on their way to the stables to get Zanna a horse. She added with emphasis, "I think I'd rather let anyone than you have the Tri-Star."

"You sure are a bad-tempered kid, as I said a while ago," with an amused glance at the raven-wing hair that scarcely came to his shoulder. "Just 'cause I kept you from bein' killed! Would you like me better if I'd let that bronc murder you?"

"Bronc, indeed! War Dance is almost a thoroughbred. I'd ride him now if I could get him without 'Dobe's seeing me! But I can't, so I'll ride my own pony. It takes a good rider to stay on Perk, too, if he's feeling right perky."

The trail from the Tri-Star to the T I wound down through a little canyon, closely fringed by pines and quaking aspens. At the bottom it widened somewhat to form a small park, where the sunlight penetrated with difficulty, and the noise of the stream became a roar. Perk shied and pranced, with Zanna riding like a little centaur, and Brice Fuller's big bay cocked his ears and danced along rather apprehensively.

"This is called the Devil's Den," explained Zanna, with a little shiver as the canyon again wound upward and she and her companion came out into the sunlight. "It's the only spooky place round here, but it makes up for ten not so creepy. . . . I'm no scared cat, either," she defended herself at the smile in Brice Fuller's blue eyes.

"How 'bout the rest of the people livin' near?" asked Brice. "Seems like it might scare anybody with a bad conscience."

Zanna shrugged her small shoulders. "Lots of the natives won't come within a mile of it, 'specially at night. But it's quicker to go this way to Lafe Thompson's than by the highway."

The change from the acres of the Tri-Star to those comprising the T I was very noticeable, even to one less a ranchman than Brice Fuller. Fences were tumbledown; ranch house, bunkhouse, stables, corrals, all showed signs of neglect. Yet there was no reason why this ranch should not be as profitable as its neighbor.

As Zanna and Brice rode toward the low log buildings, sprawling over a grassy rise in the midst of a meadow, three men indolently detached themselves from a bench on the sunny side of the house and stood watching the riders. Zanna recognized Lafe Thompson and his tall sons, Don and Dill, handsome fellows in a coarse way, lazier than any tramps. Both Zanna and Kate wondered how the Thompsons managed to live and keep their ranch.

" 'Lo, Zanna," greeted the three, and Dill Thompson's slate-gray eyes hardened as he surveyed Zanna's companion.

" 'Lo," returned Zanna, indifferent to the admiration she always saw in the faces of the two brothers. "This is Mr. Brice Fuller, who's planning to buy a place up here in our country. He wants to look at two or three ranches, so I brought him over."

A crafty look showed on Lafe Thompson's unshaven face. It was common knowledge that Lafe wanted to sell his T I, and "retire," though he had long ago "retired" from anything resembling work! But he asked so much for the place no one could be induced to buy.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Fuller," spoke

Lafe, with a show of briskness. "Jus' happened to be takin' a smoke here to the house afore ridin' out to look after the cattle. It'll suit me fine to take you round an' show you the place."

Zanna turned Perk, with the intent to go home, when Dill put his hand on her reins. "Aw, stay a while, Zanna. I got a new hoss I want you to see. This is the fust time you been over sence you got back from your swell school."

Zanna did not like the Thompsons, but they were neighbors, and Kate and she always tried to treat neighbors with courtesy. Besides, it might do Mr. Brice Fuller good to see that she was considered an authority on horses, instead of a little girl who shouldn't ride anything but spiritless plugs.

"Can I try him?" she asked, sending a sidewise glance at the man on the big bay. "You know, I always want to try any new horse."

"Sure," put in Don, who up to now had been staring from Brice to Zanna and back again. "You're one gal as knows a hoss. Even your stuck-up school ain't took that from you."

"Come on, Mr. Fuller," urged the older Thompson. "I got my hoss tied over yonder. We can see a lot o' the ranch in the next hour or two."

Fuller hesitated, looking at the brothers, whose evident desire to have the girl stay was not lost on him. "Miss Zanna, you better come with us. 'Twon't take long, and I feel sort o' responsible for seein' you safe home."

"Pooh!" sniffed Zanna; and, touching Perk with her boot heels, she flung back over her shoulder, "Oh, it'd be too far for you to go back by our place. You can take the highway and get to Blue Rock lots quicker. Besides, there's no need of your looking at the Tri-Star for I—we won't sell."

Brice Fuller's serious face took on a harder expression as he recognized the snub. Without another word he accompanied Lafe Thompson.

"You doan like that bird, do you?" grunted Don, as he and his brother followed Zanna. "Pow'ful stuck up, ain't he, for a rancher? Think he's got any money for to buy a ranch?"

"Why-for the feller thinks he can boss you round, Zanna?" queried Dill, scowling. "Knowed him long?"

"He's not able to boss me round," answered Zanna crisply. "I never saw him until today. . . . Let's see your pony, Dill. I must go home in a few minutes."

The pony was a beauty; Zanna was so interested in putting him through his various paces that it was dusk before she realized it.

"I'll ride past Devil's Den with you, Zanna," announced Dill, with a show of bravado. "I'm better comp'ny than that stuck-up feller who come over with you, an' you like me better'n Don, anyhow."

"No, she doan, neither," glowered Don. "I like Zanna best, an' she likes me best. Ain't that so, Zanna?"

Contemptuous of both these lazy, good-for-nothing brothers, Zanna answered impishly, "Both come, so's to make sure you both get back safely. Devil's Den isn't the place for anyone like you to go through alone." Then she went on abruptly, "What makes you think Mr. Fuller's stuck-up? He's not, really. In fact, he's got all the earmarks of an up-and-coming cowman. But—" she broke off, wondering why she was defending the man.

As the three started toward the Tri-Star, Zanna scornfully watched the attempts of each brother to ride beside her and push the other behind. Their crude gestures became wearisome, however, so at the dusky entrance to Devil's Den she suddenly spurred Perk and shot ahead, calling, "Good-by! Thank you."

Chagrin and ill-temper were quite plain on the faces of the Thompson brothers. They halted uncertainly as Zanna dashed into the Den, and she was afraid they might follow. But the unsavory reputation of the place, the lateness of the hour, and the pace at which Perk was covering the road, deterred them. Zanna had expected to feel scared in the dark, echoing place, but somehow she did not, in spite of what she had told Brice Fuller, and she felt much pleased with her courageousness.

To Kate's inquiries, Zanna explained

briefly that Brice would go back to town by the highway.

"Oh! You tried to discourage him about buying the Tri-Star?"

"Why shouldn't I? Kate, must we sell?"

"The responsibility's so heavy! Zanna, there'll be money enough for us to travel, as I've always longed to do." The older sister's tone was wistful.

"Sell our home just to travel?" Zanna was almost horrified. "Kate dear, I can't see it at all." Then impetuously, "Let me buy your interest!"

"With what?" inquired Kate practically. "You know that's impossible, Zanna."

"You can go away, Kate. I'll manage the outfit. But I won't sell, anyhow not to that young cowman, Brice Fuller. He —he— Oh, he rubs me the wrong way."

As Kate tried to coax the younger girl into consenting to the sale, Zanna cried obstinately, "No, never!" and rushed to her own room.

BY daybreak Zanna had assured herself that everything would be all right again, for surely Brice Fuller would not return to the Tri-Star. She hoped he wouldn't, yet, strangely, she wanted to see him again. What could be the matter with her, she wondered.

"See here, 'Dobe," Zanna greeted that lanky individual when, after a silent breakfast, she appeared at the corrals in tan riding togs, a crimson silk shirt bringing out the color of her brunette skin and emphasizing the sparkle of her big dark eyes, "I'm ready to try War Dance again. He's a lamb."

"Lamb!" echoed 'Dobe, almost swallowing his quid as he stared, wide-eyed, at the slender, diminutive figure. "Laws, Miz Zanna, that hoss don't even find his name in no book whar no lamb ain't mentioned. He's plumb full o' skyrockets an' pinwheels, War Dance is."

"Nonsense!" retorted Zanna crisply. "I rode him yesterday, and I'll ride him every day from now on. Get him for me."

The hired man looked unhappy. He didn't want to vex this important young lady whom the entire male population of the district adored. Yet he had had orders from Kate, and 'Dobe equally adored Kate and gave her, in addition, the profoundest respect and devotion.

As 'Dobe hesitated, Zanna threw up her head in her imperious way, and was remarking, "I'll saddle him myself, if—" when a cool voice behind her asked:

"Still wantin' to die young, are you?"

Zanna whirled at Brice Fuller's question, a fiery spark in her dark eyes. "What's that to you, if it's my choice?"

"I'm not so sure," returned the man quietly. "There's some others who feel they've somethin' to say 'bout it."

Zanna caught the blaze of something in Brice's eyes which made her suddenly feel as if the world were a different place from what it had been ten minutes ago. In a moment, however, a hot wave of anger swept over her. This tall young cowman was here again, when she'd hoped he wouldn't come. To think that she, Zanna Hale, whom this man had carried over his saddle like a sick dogie calf, and had said he would like to spank, should let anything he said or did make her heart skip even one beat. She hated Brice Fuller. She always would!

"Still superior!" thought Zanna to herself. "Still thinks I need spanking and disciplining, I suppose."

But before she could make the scathing reply she wished, Kate Hale came toward the corrals, and at the same time Lafe Thompson and his two sons cantered up. Lafe greeted Brice effusively. Don only nodded frumpily, and Dill, without a word, sent a murky glance from the stranger to dainty Zanna, switching her boot heel with her quirt.

"What you think, Miz Kate?" spoke up Lafe Thompson, a crafty smile on his bewhiskered face. "Think we-uns can all sell out to Fuller? We been workin' at this here ranchin' game for a long time. We's earned a right to retire, we have, an' take it easy. These two ranches'd make one good un, man," turning to Fuller, who listened with an inscrutable expression and at the same time observed Dill's attempt to get Zanna off to one side.

"Say, Zanna," Dill was saying, his bold

eyes taking in the perfection of the exquisite small figure, "if that feller buys our place, you an' me can git married in a hurry, an' have a bang-up honeymoon. Then we can come back an' live on the Tri-Star. Or if you sell it, too, we'll have a-plenty to start us some other place."

But Zanna was hardly conscious of Dill's voice. Her ears were straining to lose none of the conversation between her sister and Brice Fuller. She caught Kate's words, "Zanna and I can't give any decision yet, Mr. Fuller." However, the older girl's challenging glance at Zanna plainly said, "I'm expecting you to agree with me." What a mess! Zanna didn't want to oppose Kate, but—

"Then they ain't no reason why you can't think more 'bout the T I," boomed Lafe Thompson. "Better come over, Fuller, an' le's talk 'bout it."

"I want to stay and see more of the Tri-Star today," answered Brice unenthusiastically.

"Then come over later, can't you?" amended Lafe irritably.

"Why, yes, I s'pose I can," said Brice uncertainly.

"A'right. I'll be 'spectin' you afore evenin'," cut in the eldest Thompson. "Come 'long, boys. We gotta get to work." Swelling importantly at the unusual idea of "working," he started off.

But Dill and Don made no move to follow. Both were now close to Zanna, Don asking, "S'pose this Fuller carries 'nough spondulicks to put up a payment on the place he'll buy? I'd sure like to get the chance to git off the ol' ranch for good an' all."

"Probably does," responded Zanna indifferently. "He looks as if he had money," her face expressing unconscious admiration of the tall, bronzed, well poised man who stood beside Kate, hat in hand, while the breeze ruffled his thick hair.

Catching the glance, Dill's murky eyes narrowed. "Don't like the feller, do you, Zanna?" he asked. "Ain't changed your mind 'bout him since yesterday?"

Angry at Dill's having caught her glancing at Brice, Zanna shrugged her shoulders and tossed her little head. "It wouldn't hurt me if I never saw him again. He's brought nothing but trouble."

"That's the way to treat outsiders," approved Dill. "Well, don't ferget what I was tellin' you, Zanna. . . . Come 'long, Don. We gotta help the ol' man," with a broad wink. "S' long, Fuller. Be lookin' for you later."

As the slouchy figures ambled off on their lazy, fat horses, Kate said to her sister, "Mr. Fuller is going to stay for noon dinner and look over the ranch. Do you want to show him around, Zanna, or shall I?"

Brice Fuller's staying around the Tri-Star for a while struck Zanna as inauspicious. She was determined to try out War Dance again, but she could not while Brice was here to back up Sister Kate.

"I'm sure Mr. Fuller would rather—" she began, when she had a sudden thought. Kate would show all the ranch, good points and bad, especially the good. But if Zanna were pilot— "It tires you to ride, Kate dear," she hastened on, "so I'll take Mr. Fuller around."

Zanna sent a defiant glance at Brice Fuller, and followed it by a beseeching one for her sister. "Please, Kate, do let me ride War Dance!" she entreated.

The older sister turned to 'Dobe with an unspoken question. The fellow spat twice, scratched his ear, opened his mouth, shut it, but finally replied, "The dang' fire-eater didn't kill Miz Zanna yest'day, so I reckon with a good man on hand to watch, it'll be a'right. Your sister's bound to ride the hell-bender some time. This might be as good as 'nother."

Amusement danced in Brice Fuller's eyes, and vexation snapped in Zanna's as Kate said, "I'm afraid, Zanna, even if you didn't get hurt yesterday. Take Perk again, dear, so Mr. Fuller won't have to keep his eye on you instead of the ranch."

IT was a strange morning Zanna spent with the prospective purchaser of the Tri-Star. Instead of extolling her beloved home, she picked more drawbacks than even the T I could have. A few times she forgot, however, and found herself acting as enthusiastic as the perfect morning, her

joy in riding, and her love for the ranch usually made her. If only she were not with someone who thought she was just a small child—someone she was sure was much amused by her evidently assumed pessimism!

"D'you know, Miss Zanna," the deep voice remarked at last, after various attempts to turn the conversation to more pleasant things, "if I were a tax assessor, you couldn't put up a better line?"

"Maybe you are," was the cool reply. "How do we know?"

Fuller laughed, and his eyes again turned to Zanna with that blaze of something which made the girl catch her breath, while a deep blush stained her smooth, brown cheeks.

Then her naturally high spirits conquered her unfriendliness, and she giggled. "It'd be too bad for Lafe Thompson if you were. I know he wasn't any too modest about his property!"

"You know it!" laughed Brice. "You don't guess half what the T I's worth, close as you are to it. All it needs to make it unpurchasable is a gold mine and a castle from Spain!"

By the time Zanna and Brice came in to dinner they were much better friends. The barriers seemed almost wiped away, and after Zanna had changed her riding clothes to a flowered pink lawn, Brice could hardly keep his eyes off her. Zanna was aware of the subtle change in the man that had come with her change of dress. Brice Fuller was seeing her now not as the "kid" he had rescued, but as a most attractive and bewitching young woman. That is, if one could judge from the expression on his rugged, clean-cut face.

Dinner passed smoothly. But immediately the meal was over, Fuller switched the conversation to business. He liked the Tri-Star. How much did the sisters consider it was worth?

Zanna hurriedly excused herself and slipped away. She wasn't going to sit there and have Kate imploring her with her eyes to agree to a sale. She wasn't going to talk about a deal, or even think of it. Perhaps she wasn't treating good old Kate right. But she was certainly more miserable than Kate. There ought to be some solution to this puzzle; some way out agreeable to both of them. There must be!

Zanna would take a long ride to think this thing out. She'd ride War Dance, too. Accordingly, she changed again to her riding clothes, slipped out to the stable unobserved, and was soon riding away on the mettlesome black.

It had grown much colder; the sky was overcast by heavy clouds, and a thunder storm was raging on the high peaks to the northward. Zanna was loping along the road leading into Devil's Den when she became aware that it was dark as twilight, with an angry wind whipping through the trees. War Dance began to shy and pull on his bit; and, as lightning zigzagged through the dark skies and thunder echoed eerily, he reared and snorted.

Deeming it better to wait until the storm had passed, Zanna slid to the ground, led War Dance into a thick aspen grove and tied him. Then she decided to go over toward the road and watch Brice Fuller ride by on his way to the T I. She wanted to discover whether, at the sight of him, her heart would act as unmanageable as it had several times earlier this day. Would she still want to catch dark flashes of something in those blue eyes, something which caused her to thrill deliciously? Watching him, unseen, she could learn whether she were silly to invest him with such charm and interest.

Rain was falling when she stationed herself behind a thick-branched spruce beside the road. Several minutes passed, but no sound came except that of pelting raindrops on trees and shrubs and ground. Surely she could not have missed Brice.

All at once her alert ears caught the sound of hoofbeats. But strangely, the sound was of more than one horse. Had Brice met someone? Zanna watched for the first glimpse of the rider, and there soon appeared two men on horseback, black rags hanging over their faces for masks, hats pulled low, coat collars buttoned high. They stopped their horses for a minute, so near Zanna's hiding place that she could almost touch them. She nearly stopped breathing, and then felt her veins pulse

with wrath as she recognized the cautiously lowered but unmistakable voice of Don Thompson:

"He ain't here yet. Best we git back to t'other end o' the Den. Darker thar, an' Fuller'll have less chancet to find out what's comin' off than over here."

"Yeh," grunted the other masked man, whose voice was unmistakably that of Dill. "An' it's nearer home, too. We gotta get that wad hid good an' plenty, 'fore Brice Fuller gits the Law started after us."

"All same t' me if Fuller was plumb knocked off," came Don's callous remark. "Leastwise, le's send him so nigh Kingdom Come he'll be 'most knockin' at the gate. . . . Hurry! I hate this damned Den. Makes me think o' spooks."

"Well, it oughter," chuckled the other unfeelingly. "I ain't a doubt that the Big Man o' the spooks'll catch you some day."

The two were now beyond earshot of the outraged listener. But Zanna knew enough to realize that Brice Fuller was in grave danger of being robbed—perhaps of losing his life! And the girl realized all at once that his life meant much to her, more than her own! She found herself running at top speed to get War Dance. She must stop Brice before he reached Devil's Den!

However, in her haste she missed the trail she had followed earlier, and found herself in a snarl of down timber. While she was struggling through this trap, she caught a glimpse of the road and of Brice Fuller passing along it. She stopped, and with all the strength of her young lungs called:

"Stop! Stop, Brice Fuller! Danger! Brice! Stop!"

But lightning zigzagged across the sky, and a terrific thunder clap drowned Zanna's words. She called again, but there was no reply. The hoofbeats of the big bay horse died away. Panicky and cold with fear, she managed at last to extricate herself from the impeding logs and finally reached a wild-eyed War Dance, who shivered and reared at the rolling thunder and vivid streaks of lightning.

Zanna was about to untie the horse when she noticed a hornets' nest on a nearby bush. The insects were not in sight, for the darkness had sent them into the gray ball which housed them. She had no weapon with which to battle Don and Dill Thompson. But what a potent one a hornets' nest would be, if she could use it effectively! As she was thinking this, she swiftly unstrapped her slicker from behind her saddle, cautiously approached the hornets' domicile, and threw the garment over the gray cocoon.

She was very careful to keep the nest well covered, and, as she pulled it gently from the branch, gathered the folds of the slicker closely and tied them down. If even one hornet got to War Dance, there would be no helping Brice Fuller!

Carefully the small figure mounted the animal, holding the tied sicker carefully in her left hand. Without any urging the horse trotted along the trail to the road and then skimmed along it in the direction of Devil's Den. Had not Zanna been so fearfully anxious, she would have enjoyed this fast canter through the rain-washed air. As it was, she strained her ears and eyes for what might be happening.

As War Dance made the last curve, Zanna reined him to a halt, slipped from the saddle, and tied the animal near the trail. Then she cautiously made her way into the depths of the Den, keeping in the shade of shrubbery and trees.

There was no one in the middle of the Den, and Zanna hurried as fast as possible to the narrower road climbing upward from it. There, above the noise of the storm, she heard a shot. Two shots! What might be happening to Brice sent a shudder through the small, dauntless figure. Zanna knew that if he were hurt she would want to kill his murderers. She passed the big bay, riderless, and her heart stood still. Where was Brice?

She reached a tall rock beside the road, climbed around it from the rear, and from behind a screen of wild currant bushes looked down on Don and Dill Thompson, below the rock, poring intently over a thick wallet which spilled currency and gold. The fellows were talking excitedly under their breath; but Zanna did not catch their words, for, a little farther along

the road, face down in the damp sand, lay the motionless form of Brice Fuller.

The sight recalled to her the slicker which she had been grasping all this time. She could hear a faint hum, indicating that the insects were trying to escape. The Thompson brothers were almost underneath the huge rock where Zanna stood. Reaching far out, she pulled back the ends of the cloth and let the gray ball tumble out. Hitting a projection on the rock as it fell, the nest struck the two gloating over their loot.

As the first few insects buzzed around their heads, the men tried to brush them aside. Dumbfounded by the attack of the angry hornets, the two men merely slapped viciously at the circling insects. This only stirred the hornets to greater activity, and then Dill and Don found themselves in a cloud of angry, stinging creatures which struck and stabbed with agonizing force. To stand such an attack was beyond the endurance of any human. Dropping the wallet, they sped toward their horses, which were standing alongside the road, bridle reins a-trail.

But the hornets reached there before them, and at the first sharp stings, the two horses, snorting with fear and pain, bolted in the direction of the T I.

"It's the Devil hisself!" yowled Don above the thunder. "It's hell let loose!"

"You locoed son of the devil!" spat Dill. "'Twas your idee we hold up that Fuller! If you hadn't got so interferin', likely he'd bought the T I. Now we doan git nothin', only hell, 'case we git cotched. . . . Paw don't know 'bout this, so we'll fog out without lettin' him see us."

"Le's strike for water!" howled Don. "Elst we'll be killed alive by these damned things!"

With these words the two fled through the trees in the direction of the stream.

Watching only until Don and Dill were out of sight and it seemed safe to venture forth without danger of attack by some stray yellow-jacket, Zanna jumped into the road and ran toward the prone figure of Brice Fuller. When she reached him, she knelt beside him, half turned him over, and cradled on her knees the tawny head on whose crown showed a huge bump. She began to rub his wrists, to wipe his face with her damp little handkerchief, the while whispering:

"Brice! Brice! Come back! It's Zanna calling. You can have the Tri-Star or anything else you want, if only you'll not die. For I love you, dear. I love you!"

All at once the blue eyes opened, looking straight into the girl's so close above. Brice stirred, then straightened and sat up rather uncertainly, though one arm drew Zanna possessively close.

"Did you really mean that, Zanna darlin'? That I can have anythin' I want? What if I want you most of all?"

For once all of Zanna Hale's sauciness and self-assurance deserted her. With downcast eyes and flaming cheeks she whispered so Brice could hardly hear:

"I meant it all; every word."

"Then," said the man contentedly, "I'll buy the Tri-Star, but I'll insist that Zanna goes with it, so I'll always know where she is."

" 'Insist that Zanna goes with it,' " the words echoed joyously. *"That's* the way out of Kate's and my problem!" For she realized that now Kate could travel, while she herself could stay on her beloved Tri-Star—though not alone.

But Brice was saying more. "I'll buy the T I as well, so as to get rid of the whole Thompson outfit—though I reckon old Lafe's good-for-nothin' sons are high-tailin' it to parts far elsewhere. They fired twice at me—high—and rushed me with a club. They knocked me out for a while, but I came to in time to see you teach 'em the merry dance of the hornets. How they did howl!" And Brice laughed at the recollection.

Zanna laughed, too, and added, "Your money's safe in your wallet. They were clawing at their faces and necks too hard to carry anything."

There was a silence during which Brice kissed the sweet face against his shoulder. Suddenly Zanna asked, "I don't have to stay on the Tri-Star always, do I, Brice? Can't I go where you go?"

"Always, everywhere, together, dear."

The Trouble-Hunter

By Paul Evan Lehman

Like a predatory animal devouring its helpless fellow creatures, Disney Kerr stalked the range-land. And plenty of trouble the young deputy walked into when he first rode out to the range-hog's ranch.

TWO men were seated in the living room of the Bar 7 ranch house. One was the owner, Disney Kerr; the other, a tall, quiet-spoken young fellow in the garb of cowpuncher. Kerr was speaking:

"... and so I told Sheriff Crosby to send up a deputy that ain't known at this end of the county. This thievin's got to stop, Nolan, and it's up to you to stop it."

Larry Nolan was Irish; it showed in his deep blue eyes with their fringe of dark lashes, and in the curly, almost blue-blackness of his hair. It showed to advantage, too, in the rough and tumble of a fight against odds, whether with guns or clubs or wits.

"Crosby didn't tell me much." Western born and bred, Nolan showed no trace of Irish in his drawling speech. "Just said yore house had been busted into twice and both times some money taken."

"Some money! I reckon it was some money! Five thousand dollars in two hauls. And I nicked the thief the last time—saw blood on the window sill. I know damn well who it is, but I need a stranger to get

that money back. I'm goin' to make an example of that damn kid."

Nolan glanced up quizzically. "Kid?"

"No-account boy of eighteen. Spawn of a squatter named Blane who lives on Crooked Creek due north of the Bar 7. I had a glimpse of the thief when he slipped through the window. Slight and wiry he was, just like Cliff Blane; and the last time I seen Cliff, he was limpin'. Felt like grabbin' the brat by the neck and chokin' him right there; but that wouldn't 'a' got my money back. It's yore job to recover the cash and chuck that kid in jail—er shoot him."

Larry Nolan felt a twinge of dislike. Kerr was too savagely vindictive; but then, he reminded himself, Kerr had been robbed of five thousand dollars.

"Why don't yuh keep yore money in a bank?" he asked.

Kerr glared at him. "None of yore business, but I'll tell yuh. Don't believe in 'em. Also, the only bank in town failed eight months ago. I cain't handle checks, now, so when I sell stock I get cash. First time I had two thousand dollars in my desk. The thief busted the lock and stole it. Next time I slept with three thousand under my pillow. I'm damned if that lousy kid didn't sneak it out from under my head! And Zeb Gunlach watchin' the house, too!"

"Who is he?"

"Gunlach? One of my men. Little, but hell-on-wheels when it comes to slingin' a gun. Musta been asleep on the job. Claimed he cut a finger openin' a can of tomatoes and was huntin' for a rag." Kerr snorted his disbelief.

Larry stood up, and his tall frame towered over the short one of pudgy Disney Kerr. "I'll be movin' along. Good mornin'."

Kerr followed him to the door. "Yuh bring in that kid, and I'll see that yuh don't lose nothin'," he said significantly.

"I'm workin' for the county," Larry reminded him. "But yuh can tell me this: Why do yuh hate these Blane folks so much?"

Kerr stared at him. "Don't hate 'em. It's the other way around. The busted Jupiter Bank held a mortgage of theirs, and when it was offered for sale I bought it. They defaulted the first interest payment, and I foreclosed. That's all. Good-by."

Nolan mounted his roan cow-horse and rode slowly northward. The Blanes had defaulted, and Kerr had foreclosed. That was all! Took their home from them and probably their stock, and kicked them off the range. That was all! Larry began to hate Disney Kerr.

HE rode steadily until he sighted a cabin on the edge of the creek, then dismounted in a hollow, picketed his horse, and passed the rest of the afternoon smoking and thinking. As twilight approached he resumed his journey. It was dusk when he finally drew up before the cabin and hallooed.

The man who answered his summons was long-haired and bearded, but his frame was erect and strong, and his invitation to alight delivered in a hearty, booming voice. "Put up yore hawss and come in, stranger. Supper's just about ready."

Larry dismounted and cared for his horse; then followed his host into the house, where the rest of the Blane family awaited them—small, wiry Mrs. Blane, bird-like and smiling; a slim boy who Larry discovered was Cliff; and a brown-eyed, quiet-faced girl, Nancy. They greeted him and seated themselves at the table.

Larry found it difficult to follow the conversation of his host. His attention was on the girl who sat opposite him, eyes on the plate before her. She did not eat, merely picked at the food. The lamp light rippled across her hair, and the length of her lashes was accentuated by the soft brown contour of the cheeks they brushed. Larry felt a little quickening of the pulse. This slim girl was by far the prettiest he had ever met.

She raised her eyes to his just once. There was a question in them, faintest hint of fear or apprehension. Larry remembered his business here with an annoyed start. Her brother was guilty, and she knew it and feared for him.

"Yuh'll stay the night," the father was saying. "We ain't got much, Nolan, but yo're shore welcome to what we have."

Larry experienced no elation. He had

purposely arrived at the cabin so late in the afternoon in order that Blane would extend this invitation. His duty required that he become acquainted with the Blane boy, that he find an opportunity to search for the stolen money; but his task had suddenly become distasteful. This tracking down of kids and women was no job for a square-shooting Irishman. Almost was he persuaded to go back where he came from and ask Sheriff Crosby to send up another deputy.

Supper over, Blane and his son left the house to see to the stock. Mrs. Blane went into the kitchen, and Nancy, a bit reluctantly, Larry thought, invited him to the veranda. They sat in silence for a few minutes, Larry smoking thoughtfully, the girl staring out into nothing.

Larry spoke carelessly: "Notice yore brother limps. Have an accident?"

The girl eyed him levelly. "Yes. A horse stepped on his foot."

"Shore enough! Well, there's nothin' that hurts worse. I've had 'em come down on my toes, and it doesn't feel good a-tall."

The girl's voice was quite steady. "He'll lose a nail; but it really isn't very bad. . . . Mr. Nolan, are you here for some particular purpose—in this country, I mean—or are you just passing through?"

Nolan smoked in silence a moment. "Well," he said at last, "I'm not shore, ma'am. Yuh see, I'm what yuh might call a trouble-hunter. Somehow I'm always gettin' into trouble and gettin' out again; but in doin' so I always aim to land on the side of Justice."

"Then you can't be working for Disney Kerr," said the girl gravely. "I thought for a moment you were."

Larry grinned. "Evidently yuh don't think much of this Kerr fellow."

"I certainly don't," the girl answered hotly. "He should spell his name *C-u-r* instead of K-e-r-r. But if you're looking for trouble, Mr. Nolan, I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place. Everything is peaceful here. Banks fail and mortgages are foreclosed without any fuss whatever."

"I heard that the Jupiter Bank failed eight months ago, but I didn't hear much about the mortgages."

"Disney Kerr bought them up; and as fast as the interest was defaulted, he foreclosed. Two months ago the Bar 7, on which he lives, belonged to us. . . . Here comes Dad now. We'd better go inside."

LARRY slept in the boy's room that night, while Cliff bedded down on the front-room sofa. For a long while the deputy sheriff lay in silence, pondering his problem. It looked like an open and shut case. The Bar 7 had been acquired by Kerr through foreclosure procedure, and young Blane, incensed, had determined to get even with Kerr by robbing him. Probably the boy would consider it retribution rather than robbery; but that didn't alter the fact that if Kerr had come by the ranch in a legitimate manner, the boy was guilty of a felony.

Larry fell asleep at last, but awoke several hours later. The vague echo of a horse's nicker was in his ears. He got up and went to the window. Outside by the moonlit corral a slim figure was saddling a horse.

Larry dressed swiftly, raised the window, and dropped to the soft sod in the shadow of the house. The figure at the corral had mounted and was walking his horse from the yard. Larry caught up, saddled his roan and cautiously rode in pursuit, crouching in the saddle and sticking to the low spots on the range. The direction was west along the winding creek. Presently he came to a fringe of trees and lost sight of his quarry. The soft splash of water told him that the rider had crossed to the far side of the creek.

He had halted his roan to listen. Before he could set it in motion again he caught sight of another shadowy figure riding diagonally across the range. He couldn't distinguish the other's features, but he could see that the rider was of less than average height and slim of build.

Nolan, hugging the trees, urged his roan to a walk, heading for the point where the creek had been forded. The second figure reached the place before him, drew up to listen, then rode at an easy gait through the water. There was hardly a splash. Larry,

face tight, waited until the other was out of hearing, then followed.

He found himself in a tangle of brush that gave way almost at once to the rough terrain of the foothills. He pulled up and listened. Directly ahead an iron-shod hoof struck rock. There was a muttered exclamation, then the creak of saddle leather as the rider dismounted.

Larry slipped from the saddle, and, leaving the reins hanging, inched forward on foot. A slender form, crouching, appeared before him, and at the same instant Larry heard the impatient stamp of a horse some distance ahead. The figure straightened and Larry caught the quick gleam of moonlight on polished metal.

He stepped forward and rammed his own sixgun into the small of the other's back. "Yuh can drop yore hardware, mister," he said softly.

He heard the soft hiss of expelled breath as the fellow exhaled; then the gun clattered to the stones. Larry ignored the sudden commotion from the point farther on. Whoever was there had vaulted to his horse and was running him recklessly away from the creek.

"Turn around, right easy," ordered Larry.

The fellow obeyed and the faint light showed Larry a face contorted with rage. It was a face he did not know.

"Who the hell are you?" grated the man.

"Yo're first," said Larry. "Who are you?"

"I'm Gunlach—work for Kerr. And you must be that deputy that Crosby sent up. Well, yuh've shore gummed the works. I had that kid dead to rights. He was aimin' for where the money is hid. Damn you anyway!"

"Better save yore breath to explain why yo're ridin' around at night," advised Larry coolly.

"I'm ridin' for the same reason you are. Been watchin' this crick all night. Seen young Blane cross and followed him."

"I see. And yuh cut yore finger openin' a can of tomatoes?"

He thought he saw the other start. "Who told yuh that?"

Larry ignored the question. "Got hungry while yuh were on watch and swiped a can of tomatoes from the cook shack. Then, not havin' opened more than a million durin' yore lifetime, yuh let yore knife slip and cut yore finger."

"Cut it on the can," corrected the other gruffly.

"Get on yore hawss and get out of here while I'm feelin' generous," said Larry. "After all, I'm not so shore about yuh. Yuh might be the thief yoreself."

Gunlach sputtered and swore, but finally turned and strode over to where his horse was standing. "Yuh'll hear from me again," he promised, and rode off.

Larry returned to the ranch and quietly off-saddled. A bay in the corral had been ridden recently, and the saddle blanket on the corral rail was wet. He entered his room by the window and, smiling wryly, once more prepared for bed.

An intriguing theory was beginning to form in his mind. Perhaps the thief wasn't young Cliff Blane after all. Suppose Zeb Gunlach, knowing of the money in his employer's possession, had stolen it, figuring that the theft would be blamed on the Blanes! Suppose that random shot fired by Disney Kerr had nicked Gunlach instead of the boy. A limp didn't prove anything; the intruder might have been hit in the arm, or the side. Perhaps that tin-can cut had been a hasty afterthought on the part of Gunlach; Cliff's limp, an unfortunate coincidence.

LARRY was up at daylight. The parlor sofa was deserted, and when he went to the back porch to wash up, he saw the boy and his father at the stable. He walked down and helped them feed and water the stock.

When they returned to the house, Mrs. Blane and Nancy were getting breakfast. Larry had a chance to watch the girl as she went about setting the table. Sight of her shocked him a bit. Her face was drawn, and her brown eyes were clouded with pain or worry. She ate, as before, sparingly.

Breakfast over, Larry, having no excuse for remaining, thanked them for their hospitality and prepared to leave. Blane

went after his horse, and young Cliff, with a significant glance at his sister, followed. Mrs. Blane went into the kitchen, and the girl walked with Larry to the porch. There he turned and smiled at her.

"Miss Nancy, I told yuh I was a trouble-hunter. A blind man could see that yo're in some kind of trouble now. Maybe I can help."

The girl was gazing down toward the corral where her brother was limping under the weight of Larry's stock saddle. "There is nothing you can do."

"Cain't always sometimes tell," replied Larry lightly. "A professional trouble-hunter comes in handy a right smart of times. And often trouble looks a heap bigger when yo're right close up to it than when yo're standin' off at a distance. I'd shore admire to help, if I can."

She turned to eye him then, and her gaze seemed to go clear to the very soul of him. He looked directly into the troubled brown eyes, and he was smiling.

"I think maybe I can find something for you to do," she said at last. "Sit down just a moment, Mr. Nolan; here on the porch."

He gravely seated himself beside her and waited. She seemed to be thinking. Then she spoke, slowly, deliberately:

"It's about this man, Kerr. There was a bank in Jupiter. Its president was a fat, oily man named Ricks. He was always very conservative with his loans until . . . right near the end. Then he suddenly became liberal. He lent money to six different ranchers in as many days. Dad was one of them.

"We had just bought the Bar 7. The buildings and range were good, but the stock had been sold off. Dad wanted to make a big thing of it. He borrowed fifteen thousand dollars, planning to spend ten thousand or so for stock and keep the balance to run on. Ricks granted the loan, taking a mortgage on the ranch, as is usual. Father left the money on deposit and went on a cattle buying trip. When he had bought some ten thousand dollars' worth, he started driving home.

"By the time he got here the bank had closed, and his checks were returned unpaid. The men who had sold the cattle took them back, but Dad lost not only the ten thousand but also the five he still had on deposit. We got back a few hundreds when the bank's affairs were settled—enough to build this place here."

Larry's voice rang with sympathy. "Shore that was tough luck, ma'am. What become of Ricks? And where does Kerr fit in?"

"Ricks disappeared. The examiners said he must have known for a long time that the bank was going to fail. Kerr drew all his money out the day before the bank closed. Said he had a big deal on and needed the cash. Just a lucky coincidence, you know! And he bought up all the mortgages. When the interest wasn't paid, he foreclosed. Now, Mr. Trouble-Hunter, figure it out for yourself. Maybe you'll reach the same conclusion I have—that Kerr was working with Ricks; that Ricks made the loans at Kerr's suggestion; that Ricks tipped Kerr off when the bank was going to close; that Kerr bought up the mortgages in order to enrich himself at the expense of men poorer than he. Maybe you'll believe as I do that Kerr is nothing but a wretched thief!"

Larry was staring at her. She had held her voice to a low pitch, but it rang with vehemence and hate. The brown eyes were blazing, the crimson lips trembling with emotion. Her fingers were clenched into two tiny fists. Involuntarily his hand closed over one of them and pressed it very tightly.

"I do believe just as you do, Miss Nancy," he said. "Shore, it's as plain as the nose on my face. The crooked sonofagun! And I—"

He got to his feet and faced her. She had risen, too, and some of the fire had gone from her eyes. "You see how it is?" she said wearily. "Just a suspicion—no proof. But if you could find Ricks—force a confession from him—it would change everything."

"Ricks has gone, yuh can be sure of that," said Larry quietly. "But we'll corral this Mr. Disney Kerr some way or other. I promise yuh that, Miss Nancy."

The two Blanes came up with Larry's horse, and the deputy bade them good-by

and swung into the saddle. He reached the Bar 7 before noon and halted just outside the house. Disney Kerr did not wait for him to enter, but came stalking jerkily from the veranda, Zeb Gunlach at his heels.

"Nolan, what the hell yuh been doin'?" Kerr demanded angrily. "Zeb had that kid cornered last night, and yuh butted in and spoiled the whole play! By Gawd, Crosby is goin' to hear about this."

Larry held his Irish temper in check. "That's yore privilege, Kerr. But remember one thing: Yuh ain't shore the Blane boy is the thief. You just think he is. It might be like I told Gunlach—that he, himself, robbed yuh."

"Yuh crazy fool!" exploded Kerr. "Zeb's my own man."

"He likes money the same as all of us," replied Larry shortly. He was watching the little gunman closely. "I'm not sayin' he did it, but look at the thing through my eyes for a minute. The thief was small and slim. That might be Cliff Blane, and it might be Gunlach. Yuh had the money hid. Maybe Cliff guessed where, maybe Gunlach knew. There was blood on the window sill. Cliff Blane says a hawss stepped on his foot, which is quite likely; Gunlach says he cut his finger on a tomato can. Figger it out for yoreself."

"By Gawd. I oughta kill yuh for that!" blurted Gunlach.

"Try it," said Larry savagely. "I'd shore admire to look at yuh through powder smoke! I don't like the cut of yore face, fella. Yo're a dirty little gun-slinger that wouldn't take a chance unless the deck was stacked. Yuh don't scare me a damn bit. Now how do yuh like that?"

Kerr interposed hastily. His anger had suddenly died. "Now, boys, no fightin'. This here takes careful figgerin'. I see how yuh look at it, Nolan; so does Zeb, but naturally he's all madded up about it. Zeb, yuh go about yore business; I'll talk things over with the deputy. Come in, Nolan."

Gunlach slouched away, but the glare that he gave Nolan boded no good for the tall deputy. Larry followed Kerr into the house.

Kerr indicated a chair by the table, sank into one himself, and pushed a box of cigars toward Nolan. "Smoke? Help yoreself. Now let's get down to business. I understand how yuh feel about Gunlach. Yo're wrong, but thinkin' like yuh do shows yuh got a head on yore shoulders. I still believe it was the kid, and I'm ready to gamble to prove it. I sold one of them foreclosed ranches, and the money is comin' to me on day after tomorrow's stage. Ten thousand dollars."

"Yo're takin' a chance."

"I'm willin'. I'm goin' to get that kid. I let the word get around, and by tonight the news will be common property. Whoever took the five thousand will try for the ten."

"And when he does, yuh'll nab him."

"*Yuh'll* do the nabbin'. I'm no fightin' man. Yuh'll let him take the money, and the box won't be locked very securely. Follow him to his cache. In that way yuh get back the five thousand in addition to the ten."

"And Gunlach?"

"He says he's gonna tail that stage himself. If he's the thief, yuh got a good chance of nabbin' him and provin' yore theory—or go to glory tryin'."

"Day after tomorrow, yuh say?"

"That's right; day after tomorrow sure."

Larry got up. "I'll be on the job."

"Good. And—don't mess it up this time."

Larry went out and mounted the roan. He rode straight to Jupiter and had dinner. Then he went to the stage office and sent a telegram.

"What time does the stage get in?" he asked casually.

The agent was reading the telegram, his eyes bulging. "Say, this tele— What's that? Oh, the stage. Gets in about seven in the evenin', This tele—"

"That telegram is confidential," said Larry sternly. "If a hint of it leaks out, I'll know where to find the hole."

"Sure, sure," agreed the agent hastily, and Larry went outside.

He rode away from town over the trail the stage would follow when coming in. If the thief were somebody in the vicinity, the hold-up would occur not far from town. So he came at last to a saddle-like ridge forming a pass between two hills.

The road at this point was narrow, at the very top of a steep climb. The slopes on both sides were studded with boulders and dotted with scrubby piñons. It would be an ideal place. Larry, satisfied, rode back to town.

The next day he re-visited the spot, taking with him several hundred feet of rope. A dim trail descended the ridge at an angle to the road, and he followed this until he came to a clearing. Here he built a rope corral. Then he ascended to the top of the ridge and sat for a moment looking over the country. Far below him and to the east he could make out the fringe of trees along Crooked Creek. Between him and the creek was a little huddle of buildings that he knew must be the Bar 7. Beyond, hidden by the trees, must be the Blane cabin.

He rode a bit farther along the stage road, looking for other likely places where a stage hold-up might be engineered. The farther he went the more satisfied he became that he had picked the most logical location. He returned to town at last and found an answer to his telegram awaiting him. He read it and whistled thoughtfully.

THE next morning he secured a horse at the livery barn and led him to the little corral in the clearing. Here he loosed him, leaving a generous measure of oats in a box and water from a nearby spring in a bucket he had fetched along. Then he rode to the next town, stabled the roan, and waited.

At three o'clock the stage rattled in, and Larry climbed aboard. The strong-box was in its place behind the guard. There was no sight of Zeb Gunlach. For three hours the vehicle lurched along on its way to Jupiter; then the pace slackened and Larry knew they were climbing into the pass that crossed the saddle between the hills. He was the only passenger.

The horses toiled to the top of the climb at a slow walk; then there came an exclamation from the driver, followed by the rasp of brakes. The coach stopped with a lurch. Larry, gun in hand, sprang from the vehicle.

Across the narrow road a rope had been stretched, and from the center of this barrier fluttered a piece of brown wrapping paper. The guard had cautiously dismounted, and, jerking his head from side to side as he advanced, was walking toward the obstruction. Larry followed him.

"Keep yore eye peeled, Deppity," warned the guard, and snatched the paper from the rope. He read the printed message, swore, and handed it to Nolan.

> We have you covered. Drop the money box and get going. Make a funny move and we will wipe you off the earth.

Larry grinned. The second "we" had originally been an "I." It was a one-man hold-up, all right.

The guard was peering about, scanning the rocky piñon-covered slopes on both sides. Not a thing showed; not a glint of sunlight on gun-barrel, not the crown of a hat or the toe of a boot.

"What in hell are we goin' to do?" he asked perplexedly.

"Yuh know yore orders," said Larry. "Not too much opposition. I reckon yuh'd better do as the note says."

The guard climbed to the top of the stage and handed the box down to Larry. He placed it on the ground, noticing that the lock was of the flimsiest construction. Then he let down the rope and got into the stage. The driver cracked his whip and the vehicle rumbled over the rise and started down the far side.

Before they had covered two hundred yards Larry had the door open and was calling cautiously to the driver. "Don't stop; I'm goin' to drop off!"

He suited the action to the word, flinging himself into the brush at the side of the trail. He rolled over, regained his feet, stood listening. From back in the pass came the sullen boom of a six-shooter. He started toward the top of the ridge at a run.

It was uphill, and his high heels bothered him. He heard another shot, then two more. He thought of Gunlach. Was he really following the stage, and had he come upon the Blane boy? Panting with exertion, he reached the pass, floundered out on the level. The strong-box stood in the middle of the road, top hanging by one hinge. From the trail to his right he heard

the crash of underbrush that told of flight and pursuit.

He turned into the path and followed at a run, presently turning off into the little clearing where he had corralled the horse. He hastily adjusted the bridle, didn't wait to saddle. Flinging himself across the animal, he broke him through the opening in the rope and spurred him recklessly downhill. He could hear the crash of underbrush made by the bandit and his unknown pursurer as they thundered down the trail. The sun was sinking behind the hills; by the time Larry reached the foot of the trail and came out on open range it was too dark to recognize the two riders ahead of him.

The chase led unerringly toward the spot where he had come across Zeb Gunlach three nights before. He heard the splash as both horses took the water, and spurred after them at a dead run. He reached the uneven terrain on the far side of Crooked Creek and flung himself from his horse. A shot boomed out.

Larry, gun in hand, went crashing through the brush. He heard the sounds of a violent tussle, then a shrill scream of agony. He burst into a little glade, checked himself in mid-stride. Two figures were locked in a struggle, and both of them were slim and wiry. Suddenly one of them went limp. The other flung the lax figure from him and turned, snarling, toward Larry. Even in the poor light Larry recognized him. It was Gunlach.

Instinct played its part here. Almost without realizing it, Larry brought his gun up—blended its roar with that of the other. He felt a tug at his sleeve, fired again—again. The figure before him seemed to melt into nothingness. He heard a sobbing cough.

Gun ready, he advanced. There was no other sound; the vague figure on which he had fixed his gaze did not move. He bent over it. It was Gunlach, all right, and he was dead.

The other prone figure stirred. Larry dropped to his knees beside it, slid one arm beneath the slight shoulders. Then he started as though he had been stung.

"My God! *Nancy Blane!*"

"My—my arm," came a moan from the girl.

Larry reached for the dangling member, felt the sticky wetness of fresh blood. Quickly he shed his coat, placing it beneath her head. Then with his knife he cut away the dark shirt and struck a match.

She was watching him with eyes unnaturally bright and cheeks that were flushed with fever. He looked at the wound, then swore softly. It was not a new one, and he could tell that infection was beginning to set in.

"Yuh pore little darlin'," he said pityingly. "It was you that Kerr shot; and yuh've born it without a whimper all this time! God, what a girl."

Bending over, he gathered her in his arms and carried her tenderly to the bank of the creek. Deftly he bathed the wound and bandaged it as best he could. She watched him with eyes that shone in the moonlight. Suddenly she began to cry.

"I did it," she wailed. "I stole it—five thousand before, ten thousand now. And I hid it. It's ours—Dad's. Kerr robbed him of it. Larry, Larry, you don't blame me?"

Larry choked. "Blame yuh! Yuh—yuh angel! And I thought it was Cliff. And so did Kerr; and Gunlach. Listen, Nancy, is that money safe?"

"Yes. It is in—"

"Don't tell me. But is it safe? Can they find it?"

"No; they'll never find it."

"Good. Now yuh lie here and rest a bit. I'll get the hawsses, and what's left of Gunlach. Then we're ridin' to Kerr's. And listen, Nancy: Zeb Gunlach was the thief. Yuh understand? I caught him red-handed."

She nodded in the darkness, wondering.

Larry brought up the horses, slung Gunlach over his mount, helped Nancy on her mount. Then they headed for the Bar 7.

IT was late when they reached the house, but there was a light burning. Kerr was probably anxiously awaiting news of the hold-up.

Larry dismounted, helped the girl down. "Yuh keep right quiet and leave everythin'

to me," he said softly. "I'll handle Mr. Disney Kerr."

He pulled the dead Gunlach from the saddle, slung the inert form over his shoulder, and started for the house. The door opened and in the lighted rectangle stood the figure of Kerr.

"Who is it?" he called.

"Nolan. I got yore thief." He stepped inside the doorway and dropped the dead man at Kerr's feet. "Here he is."

Kerr was staring. "My God! Zeb Gunlach. I—I can't believe it. Where is the money?"

"Hid away some place," answered Larry shortly. "I don't know where."

"Hid? Yuh didn't get it? Fifteen thousand—yuh numbskull, you!"

He grabbed his hat and started for the door.

"Just a minute," said Larry. "Where are yuh goin'?"

"I'm goin' after it, yuh fool! Where did yuh think I was goin'?"

"Yo're goin' to jail. Kerr, yo're under arrest."

Kerr stopped as though he had been struck. His eyes were wide as he stared at the tall deputy. "Arrest?" His voice was pinched as though his throat had suddenly gone dry. "What for?"

"For conspiracy to wreck the Jupiter Bank. Yuh didn't think we'd catch up with Ricks, did yuh? Didn't think he'd squeal to save his own hide? Well, when I was in Jupiter I sent a telegram." He fished a yellow slip from an inside pocket. "Also I got an answer. The game is up, Kerr. Yuh knew the bank was goin' to fail and persuaded Ricks to lend all the money he could get rid of, takin' mortgages as security. Then when the failure came, yuh bought up those mortgages cheap. . . . Well, I'll be puttin' the bracelets on yuh."

Kerr licked his lips and gazed around helplessly. "Wait! Wait a minute. Is—can't we fix this—some way?"

"Yuh'd bribe an officer?"

"No! No, of course not; but if I can square things—make it right—"

"Well, now, that's different. The law, after all, is to promote justice, not merely to punish. Kerr, I'll give yuh a chance. Yuh robbed six men of their ranches. Restore them and get out of the country, and I'll turn yuh loose."

"I—I'll do it," agreed Kerr.

"Then I'll take yuh into town where we can fix up the deeds proper. Meanwhile, I'll just tie yuh up for a spell," Larry said.

The young deputy did a neat trussing job and then turned to the girl.

Nancy had dropped into a chair and, wound forgotten, was watching Larry, with shining eyes. "Larry! Oh, Larry, what have you done? You've saved us—saved the Bar 7 and all the other ranches—but—but you're an officer! And how did you do it so quickly? How did you catch up with Ricks?"

"Come outside and I'll tell yuh about it." Then, when they were out on the porch, "I didn't," Larry told her gravely. "I didn't say we'd caught him, did I? I jest said Kerr never thought we'd catch up with him; I just asked Kerr if he'd ever thought Ricks would squeal."

"But the telegram?"

"The telegram? Oh, that was genuine, all right. Here it is."

He passed the little slip over to her, and as she read it her cheeks went pink. This is what she read:

> Ricks safe in Mexico. Sorry. Gunlach wanted dead or alive for murder in Cisco County. Watch him. Bad hombre. Sorry you are resigning. Who is the lucky girl?
> Crosby.

She looked up, and her eyes were swimming. "You resigned—because you didn't want to arrest Cliff!"

Larry answered gaily. "I didn't know how the thing was comin' out. And I wouldn't have violated my oath of office by lettin' Kerr go. We hadn't a thing on him, although he must be guilty of somethin' big or he wouldn't have given up those ranches so easy. But I resigned because I'm sorta tired of this blood-hound business. Yore dad has the Bar 7 back, and likely he'll find fifteen thousand dollars somewhere to sorta start in ranchin' again. Maybe he'll need a good foreman. I'm a right good cowhand."

"Oh, Larry! If you're half as good a

cowboy as you are an officer, he'd be crazy not to hire you!"

Larry Nolan went over to her and looked down into the brown eyes. "Don't let us misunderstand, Nancy," he said gently. "I don't care about the ranch, or the foremanship, or anything else but you. Yuh know that; I couldn't hide my feelin's for yuh if I tried. Nancy, I haven't a thing but one hawss, one saddle, and fourteen dollars in my pocket; but I love yuh. Will yuh marry me?"

The brown eyes were soft and a bit shy. "Larry, dear, you don't know me at all. I'm mean, and—and quick tempered, and—"

With a gentle finger under the soft chin he tilted her face until the brown eyes were looking directly into his Irish blue ones.

"Shore, darlin', and didn't I tell yuh I am a trouble-hunter?"

She sighed happily and snuggled close to him. Her own eyes were twinkling. "Then I guess you've found it—plenty!"

Members of Trail's End

Whose pictures appear on pages 474 and 475

Page 474

FIRST ROW, *left to right*—Marguerite Merrill, Port Arthur, Ontario, Canada; Wilmoth Halder, Wichita Falls, Texas; L. A. Henderson, Albany, Ga.

SECOND ROW, *left to right*—Elsie Swann, Blanch, N. C.; Andrew Mathson, Chicago, Ill.; George W. Elkins, West Haven, Conn.

THIRD ROW, *left to right*—Paride Caesar Ercol, I, Manhattan Beach, Calif.; Margaret C. Parker, White River Junction, Vt.; Albert Donatti, Higbee, Mo.

Page 475

FIRST ROW, *left to right*—M. L. Elliott, Houston, Del.; C. Johnson, Walla Walla, Wash.; Tressa V. Froella, Mahoningtown, Penn.

SECOND ROW, *left to right*—Charles May, Seligman, Ariz.; Mary Dimario, Globe, Ariz.; George Roberts, Modesto, Calif.

THIRD ROW, *left to right*—Kittie M. Hayden, Glastonbury, Conn; Ernest Hale, Morrillton, Ark.; Nellie M. Kellogg, Norwalk, Ohio.

124

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.

I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

(*Miss*)
(*Mrs.*)
Signed (*Mr.*) .....

Address .....

Three *successive* coupons make you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.
Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.
You must be a member to secure the pin.
Please *print* your name and address plainly.

Say It with Sixguns

By Amos Moore

PART THREE

SYNOPSIS

GALE CHANDLER, foreman of the Upside-Down K.
KIT and MARTHA KENNISTON, owners of the Upside-Down K.
BULL STOCKRIDGE, owner of the Long Bar Circle, a dude outfit.
TONY MORELLO, EDWARD WINTER and JUDITH HAWLEY, guests at the dude ranch.
BIG CHARLIE BARNETT, ONE-EYED MOSE and MONTE RUIDOSO, employees of the Log Bar Circle.
ROBERT STANLEY, boarder at the Upside-Down K.

In the town of Silver Forks Gale Chandler administers a beating to Stockridge for talking disparagingly about Kit Kenniston. Later Tony Morello comes over to the Upside-Down K bearing apologies for the affair in town and inviting the Kennistons and their cowboys to attend an impromptu rodeo at the Long Bar Circle.

They accept from politeness rather than inclination, and find the dude ranch an elaborate layout catering to old men and girls of questionable character.

A shooting match is arranged between Chandler and Two-Spot Lorton, and the latter for some reason lets Gale beat him. Then Robert Stanley, who is apparently very drunk, shoots off his gun, his bullet missing the target and going clean through the silo attached to the barn.

Meanwhile Judith Hawley has been paying a great deal of attention to Gale, even inviting him to call on her that evening. Then suddenly, while Gale stands talking to Kit and Winter, Lorton

takes a shot at him. Two-Spot misses, and explains that he was shooting to protect Winter, who has been very attentive to Kit and whom he thought Gale was threatening.

That night Edward Winter is killed out on the range, and the murder laid to Chandler, who was out riding. He is taken to the Long Bar Circle by Stockridge and his men, who came upon him bending over Winter's body. Meanwhile Robert Stanley has unexpectedly appeared on the scene of the crime shortly after the shooting, and Kit, unknown to anyone but Stanley, has herself witnessed the killing.

CHAPTER XIII

Beauty to Distress

SITTING there in the hot, stifling darkness, with the tight-drawn ropes sawing deeper into the flesh of his wrists every time he moved to try to ease his position, Gale went back over everything that had happened, and mentally tabulated every possible clue, as he had done a score of times before. There could be but one reason for Bull Stockridge's elaborate attempt to get him out of the way—the renegade rancher was afraid of him. But why? It would hardly be because he had discovered that the Long Bar Circle catered to people of questionable morals. Nor did the fact that he had knocked Stockridge down in Silver Forks seem a likely answer. That was a personal matter between Stockridge and himself, and any vengeance the Long Bar Circle man might plan would scarcely necessitate the connivance of Judith Hawley and Tony Morello—not to mention the killing of Edward Winter.

It was a funny kind of jig-saw puzzle, in which human acts and motives were the pieces that, properly fitted together, would give him the solution. He had a new piece now, one which had not been in his possession when he had left the Upside-Down K after supper. It was the shooting down of Edward Winter, and the obvious plot to fasten the guilt for that dastardly crime on him.

It was clear, of course, that Judith Hawley's simulated interest in him that afternoon, her repeated invitations for him to call on her during the evening, had been the lure which was to tempt him off his home range. Simple cowpoke snared by city siren!

Then Bull Stockridge, with three tried and trusty killers, had been obliged to make a trip to the Forks after "supplies"—although not a dollar of Long Bar Circle money was expended locally from one year's end to the next! Then, on their way back, they had conveniently arrived at Three Springs simultaneously with Miss Hawley's admirer, who had turned up in the nick of time to be taken prisoner and to be accused of drygulching a rival for Kit Kenniston's favor!

And the self-confident Miss Hawley herself had impatiently waited on the front veranda, that she might be the very first to hear the news of the simple-minded one's demise! How grieved and disappointed she must have been that the neat schedule had gone askew!

What? Only one dead man on the trail, when she had expected there would be two? Monstrous! And why, by the way did she have to have the pair? Why wouldn't Gale's death have satisfied her? Had the be-spectacled little Easterner, by any odd chance, somehow gotten himself embroiled with Bull Stockridge?"

"I give it up!" he told himself helplessly. "There ain't no sense in it a-tall, an' there ain't no answer to it. An' the hell of it is that if I had a year to live, I'd give six months of it to know what the answer is! I *do* know, damn it, if I could only remember! Great jumpin' Jerusalem the golden, I do know, right this minute or that mangy son of a cross-eyed sow, Bull Stockridge, wouldn't be schemin' to fix my clock!"

A faint sound in the hall outside the door suddenly stiffened him to tense rigidity. Someone was cautiously turning the key in the lock. He heard the slight squeak of the rusty metal, then the grating of hinges, and the door was pushed open, then closed again. A little draft of cooler air was wafted against his cheek, and, mingled with it, the breath of some exotic, Oriental perfume.

It was so dark in the room that he could not see an inch in front of him; but he knew who had entered before the whisper came.

"Mr. Chandler, are you there? It's Judith Hawley!"

"Yeah, I'm here, ma'am." Gale spoke in his ordinary tones.

With a swift little forward rush she was beside him, her fingers pressing against his lips, in a gesture of anxious protest.

"Hush! Not so loud, or someone may hear us. They've all gone to bed—or nearly all—but you must be careful not to make any noise. I—I'm not supposed to be here, of course; but I—"

"Yuh what, ma'am?" He could make out the white oval of her face as she bent over him, see the pale blur of her soft, filmy gown, partly covered by a dark cloak. It was some sort of negligee or night-robe that she was wearing, not the evening frock she had worn when he had seen her on the front veranda.

"I—I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about you, a prisoner down here, knowing that in a little while the sheriff would come to take you away—and—and—" Her voice faltered oddly; there was a queer, excited little throb in it, as if she were controlling herself with difficulty. She said:

"It seemed, somehow, as if—as if I were to blame, partly, for—for what happened. I couldn't get you out of my mind. Because, if I hadn't asked you to come to see me tonight, you wouldn't have met him—Mr. Winter, I mean. He'd be alive now, and you wouldn't be here, chained up like a wild beast."

"An' bein' a tender-hearted little soul, yuh just couldn't bear the idea noways, is that it?" Gale asked ironically. "Yuh'd sneak downstairs in the dark, an' risk yore precious reputation, just to tell me how plumb sorry yuh was I was goin' to cross Jordan, huh?"

"Oh—don't!" she begged, a catch in her breath. "I can't bear to think of it. They'll hang you, won't they? For killing—"

"Will they? That the idea? Well, I don't particularly cotton to it myself. A necktie party, with me as the guest of honor, is somethin' I'd just as soon not attend. When's it comin' off?"

"Why, after you're tried, I suppose. What do you mean?" she demanded quickly. "Not that! Oh, there's not really a chance of some of these men taking the law into their own hands, is there?"

Gale was completely mystified. He couldn't make her out. She'd been right up to her chin in the plot against him, all along; and here she was getting all in a lather because it had worked!

"Tell me!" she insisted. "The sheriff's honest, isn't he? He wouldn't let anybody take you away from him, and—and—"

"Oh, the sheriff's honest, all right," he answered dryly. "Only—which ain't no news to you—he won't get here quite in time! Yuh just wanted to make sure I knew about it, didn't yuh, huh?"

Judith Hawley drew a long breath. When she spoke again, the tremulous note was gone from her voice; her guarded whisper was steady, confident, as if she had waged a battle and won a victory.

"I was afraid of something of the sort, Mr. Chandler. And it's not going to happen! I heard—well, never mind what I heard; only I couldn't sleep after it. I felt that I just *had* to see you." She was taking something from an inner pocket of her cloak, bending toward him in the darkness until her lips were close to his ear.

"I may be doing something desperately wrong; but you didn't actually plan to kill Mr. Winter, did you? Tell me the truth! When you started out this evening, you hadn't any idea of waylaying him on the trail and shooting him, had you? That's all I want to know. If you'll give me your word that it wasn't premeditated, I—"

"Yuh—what?" prompted Gale eagerly. He knew it was the very height of folly for him to expect anything from this woman except treachery and betrayal; but he could not help feeling a swift surge of hope at her unexpected speech.

"I—I'll cut these ropes, and give you a chance for your life! I—somehow, I couldn't believe you'd really done murder, no matter what you threatened this afternoon. I brought my knife with me, in case—oh, I may be doing a terrible thing, but I don't care. All I want is your word—your word of honor that you didn't—"

"Yuh've got it, ma'am. I didn't murder

Winter. An' what's more, I never had an idea of harmin' him at all. I was—"

"Oh, I was sure of it! In a fair fight, perhaps, but I knew you'd never shoot a man in the back—never!" That excited, unsteady throb was back in her voice now, and her hands were shaking, too, as she slipped the point of the sharp little knife she had taken from her cloak pocket, under the rope which bound him to the chair.

The upper part of his body freed, she quickly moved around behind him, and, with a few deft strokes of the blade, severed the loops that held his wrists and elbows together. Then, with swift, silent footsteps, she glided over to the window, fumbling with the catch which fastened the heavy wooden shutters in place.

"My legs, ma'am, they're tied to the chair legs!" he whispered, chafing his half-numbed hands and wrists to restore the circulation. "If yuh'll just let me take that knife a second—" He stopped, listening, for, as she softly opened the shutter a little way, the muted sounds of music and distant voices were audible.

"Oh!" Judith was back beside him, feeling for the lashings about his legs. "They've started dancing again! I'll have to hurry. Some of the girls might take it into their heads to go up to my room after me, and if they found I wasn't there, somebody'd be sure to put two and two together when you're missing in the morning!

"There I've cut them both. You can unwind them and just slide them off now. Give me two or three minutes to get back upstairs, and then slip out by that window. I've unfastened the shutters, and the bushes grow up right against the side of the house. If I could just get a gun for you—but I'll leave you my knife. Only if you should be captured, get rid of it some way, for my name's on the handle. But you mustn't let yourself be captured—you mustn't!"

Her hands held his for a moment; her cheek, soft and cool, and scented with that exotic Oriental perfume, lay against his own.

"Oh, Gale!" she breathed. "It might have been so different for us! But you'll think of me sometimes, won't you, Gale? You won't forget me entirely? I'm risking a lot for you tonight."

"Forget yuh, ma'am? That ain't likely! I don't know how to thank yuh for all this, but if I can get clear o' here—"

"You're going to. You've got to. Take care of yourself, for my sake. I—I don't know what you've done to me—but I'm going to see you again."

And then she was gone, as swiftly and silently as she had come. There was only the faint creak of the rusty door hinges, the click of the latch as it fell into place, to tell him that she was no longer there in the room with him.

CHAPTER XIV

So Near—and Yet—

THE unlatched shutter had swung open an inch or two, and a breath of the fresh outdoor air filtered into the stuffy room; but no light came with it. There was only the sound of music and voices and shrill, drunken laughter from the main wing of the house, the whispering rustle of the wind among the leaves of the shrubbery growing outside the window.

To cut through the coils of the riata about his legs would have been quicker than unwinding them; but Gale could not see where Judith had laid the knife, and he did not want to waste time groping about for it.

His fingers were a little swollen, and his wrists pained where the thongs had rubbed the flesh raw; but it was the work of only a moment or two to loosen the rope lashings from his legs, and let them slither to the floor. Judith Hawley had said that she must have a little time to regain her own room. He had no idea where it was—somewhere in the main part of the house, doubtless—but she'd surely have gotten back to it by this time. She'd be safe and snug, out of sight, and her part in his escape would never be suspected.

He stepped out of the ropes, took a noiseless step forward, and felt over the table top for her knife. It wouldn't do to leave it to be found by the enraged plotters when they presently came to finish

him off—they'd know immediately who had freed him. But where the devil had she put it? There was the lamp, a scattered deck of playing-cards, a few bits of old leather which he remembered seeing on the table; but no trace of a knife anywhere.

Gale decided that she must have laid it down on one of the chairs over by the wall, and was tiptoeing cautiously toward it, testing each board before he rested his weight on it, lest it creak and perhaps apprise some alert listener that someone was moving in the room. Then, all at once, footsteps sounded in the corridor; a girl giggled. He heard the scratch of a match; and, as a thin thread of light showed between the sill and the door, there came a voice he knew too well.

Only the width of that small room separated him from the open window. But he might have been a mile away, so far as his chances of slipping out undetected were concerned! For the chair to which he had been tied was almost in a direct line with the doorway, and anyone looking in would see at once that it was empty, give the alarm, and bring the whole pack to howl death at his heels.

Instantly, Gale decided on a ruse. A few quick, silent steps, a hasty groping for the discarded ropes, and he was again seated in the chair where his captors had left him, his arms behind him, his legs, in a tangle of coils, twisted about the chair legs, his head sunk on his breast. A casual look at him would show that he was still the bound and helpless prisoner he appeared to be.

And not a second too soon. The key grated in the lock, a band of bright yellow light shone on his face from the reflector behind the lamp on a wall bracket in the hall. A tall girl, the youngest, prettiest, and most brazen of Bull Stockridge's feminine "guests," tripped into the room, her arm about the neck of Robert Stanley, his arm around her waist.

There had been none too much of her dress to begin with. Now the thin material was torn, stained and splashed with wine. Her pert, red mouth had relaxed loosely, and her eyes seemed not to focus very well. In brief, Miss Angela Aragon—it was not her name, but she had as much right to it as to any of the others to which she had laid claim at various times—had drunk so much that she found it difficult to stand upright without support. She had, in fact, drunk more than her employer would have liked, perhaps; more than was her custom, or than she was able to carry gracefully.

But if she were any better off in this particular than her companion, it was not apparent. Mr. Robert Stanley's quest for "more congenial surroundings" seemed to have come to a very successful conclusion. If anything, his grin was a little sillier, his gait a little more erratic than at the rodeo earlier that day. Also, he had evidently been indulging in some rather rough horse-play with his newly acquired friends, for his tie was twisted awry, his hair was rumpled and untidy, and the greater part of a glass of whiskey had found its way to his shirt front instead of down his throat. In his free hand, he was holding a generous rye highball, which slopped over the rim of the tumbler as he gesticulated with it.

"Well, there he ish, Angel sweetie," he announced dramatically. "There'sh the scoundrel shot your nice li'l' writer friend from the Easth. Most dang'rous feller 't ever wore two gunsh—'r one, for that matter, Misther Stockridge says. Had to tie him up tighter'n nall get out, f'fear he'd murder all of ush in our bedsh tonight! Take good look at him, sweetie, an' then we'll go back 'n have 'nother li'l' drink; what say, baby?"

The girl giggled and ran her hand through Stanley's hair, pulling it playfully while she stared blearily at Gale.

"Cert'ny looks like a bad actor, don't he, big boy? 'bout as tough as they come, eh?" she hiccoughed. "I seen a bird once in Chi, 'd bumped off five or six in one night, 'n looked a whole lot like this here guy. Typ—typ"—she gave up trying to say "typical" and compromised on—"reg'-lar murderer type, eh? An' my sweetie big boy, Bobbie, helped bring him in! An' you wasn't a bit afraid of him or nothin' like it! Whattaman!"

She rumpled his hair again, and "sweetie big boy, Bobbie" grinned in maudlin fashion, almost purring at the flattery.

"Ran 'n nawful riskh, though, Angel—shure did. M'awful pleasht t' think you—you're pleasht with me, Angel sweetie—yes, indeed, I am. C'mon—have li'l' drink outta my glash an' then we'll go dansh s'more, huh, baby? Here—have li'l' drink."

He held up the glass to her lips with maudlin tenderness.

"Drink, pretty creature, drink, drink, drink," he babbled. "'C'mon, sweetie, we don' want t' shtay here any longer, do we? Don' want look any more 't desp'rate criminal, do we? C'mon!"

Gale was fairly quivering with impatience for them to be gone. They were both too drunk, of course, to see how sketchily those ropes were adjusted about the chair legs or, to notice that his arms weren't fastened at all. But, at any moment, someone else with a desire to inspect the "desperate criminal" might put in an appearance, and then the fat would be in the fire. It would be altogether too much to hope that the whole crowd was as far gone as these two pie-eyed beauties who had to hold one another up!

The presence of a prisoner at the ranch was evidently no secret now. Stanley's tongue, loosened by liquor, had probably been wagging at both ends, and he had been boasting to anyone who would listen of the part he had played in the capture of Winter's killer.

Thank God, they were going now! Angel's yearning to look at her big boy's prize had been gratified, and, their arms linked about one another, the pair started to weave toward the door, Stanley waving the tumbler like a baton.

"Kept promish, didn't I, Angel? Showed you mos' dang'rous feller 't ever wore two gunsh, huh, didn't I? Now, you goin'—"

His voice cracked suddenly; he stared at Gale, his eyes almost popping from his head, and the half-filled glass of whiskey slipped from his hand and smashed into fragments on the floor.

"Run, Angel, run!" he squealed. "He's loose! Run, girl! Help!" His voice rose to a screech that was like a hysterical woman's. "Help, Stockridge—Mose—Charlie—anybody—help! The murderer's loose! Help! Help!"

The ruse had failed, after all, and failed at the very moment when Gale had been congratulating himself on its complete success. It was all up with him now, unless he could make good his escape before those piercing shrieks, shrilling through the night silence, should bring the members of the gang in upon him.

He did not hesitate a second. Casting aside all pretense, he kicked the camouflage of ropes out of his way, leaped up from the chair, and darted toward the open window. If he could but spring over the low sill and crouch behind the shrubbery outside, there was a chance that he might be able to slip away in the darkness and elude pursuit until he could find a hiding place. It was only one chance in a thousand, perhaps—but still a chance.

But before he had taken two strides, a foot was thrust in front of him. He tripped, staggered, and plunged forward on his hands and knees, while the girl, scurrying down the hall and shrieking at the top of her lungs, added to the strident uproar that must have penetrated to every part of the big, rambling house.

Hardly had he touched the floor when he was up again; but Stanley had leaped on his back and was clinging to him as a frightened cat clings to a tree, clawing at his clothes, his arms, his legs, anything that would afford a hold, with maddening tenacity.

"Now, blast yore slimy, drunken little soul!" rasped Gale, and aimed a blow at the other's head that was calculated to silence the shrill tongue within it for some hours to come.

Unaccountably, he missed; the head was not there. It was burrowing into the middle of his spine, and the piercing screeches were going right on. Damn the drunken little coot! He didn't want to maim a fellow not much more than half his size! But with his life depending on his getting out of that window within the next few seconds, he couldn't afford to be squeamish. It was now or never for him, sure. He struck again—missed again—reached

around and literally tore the clawing, shrieking Stanley from his back and flung him halfway across the room.

Then, whirling, he sprang once more toward the window, only, in the middle of his stride, to be struck from behind by a small, hurtling body. A pair of waving arms was wrapped about his knees. His own momentum cost him his balance, and he went down on the floor with a crash. His head came in violent contact with the wall under the window, and the beam of light from the reflector of the lamp in the hall burst into a myriad of flashing stars.

"Help, Stockridge, help! He's loose! Help! Help!"

Heavy footsteps pounding along the corridor at a run; shouts and oaths at the door and a rising clamor all over the big ranch building. The crack of a rifle shot in the yard, and the thin, high whine of a bullet singing through the shrubbery by the window; the swish of torn branches as it passed through them.

It was all over. Finished! The room was full of men in various stages of dress and undress; some with guns and some with sticks, and one white-haired, white-mustached old roué in full evening clothes, brandishing a whiskey bottle with both hands as if it had been a broadsword.

And Robert Stanley, glassy-eyed and unsteady, was doing a drunken little dance of triumph around the supine form of his recent antagonist.

CHAPTER XV

In the Dark

THEY trussed the prisoner up again, more tightly and uncomfortably than before; and it was Bull Stockridge himself, his heavy-jowled face crimson and working with suppressed fury, who rammed a thick chunk of wood between Gale's jaws. Meanwhile One-Eyed Mose Ruidoso and Big Charlie Barnett wound their riatas about his arms and legs, Monte standing over him all the time with cocked and leveled forty-five, ready to cut short any attempt at resistance.

"I warned yuh not to start no row down here an' annoy my guests, didn't I?" the giant ranchman boomed. He dragged brutally at the thongs with which he was binding the gag in place, until a trickle of blood started from the corners of Gale's lacerated lips. "Didn't I promise yuh that if yuh didn't behave yoreself an' keep quiet until the sheriff come, I'd give yuh somethin' that 'u'd make yuh? Well, now, chew on that, blast yuh! Roustin' up everybody in the house with yore damn yellin', an' scarin' the ladies a'most outa their wits! Yo're a fine bird, Mister Gale Chandler!"

It might logically have been pointed out at this point that it was not Gale who had done the yelling, and that he certainly had far more reason than had the owner of the Long Bar Circle to regret that any noise had been made.

But Bull Stockridge was not concerned with logic. All that interested him was the necessity of impressing on the foggy minds of one or two of the men guests of the ranch that the prisoner had created an unseemly disturbance in the middle of the night, and that the gag was merely to prevent a repetition of it.

"There! That'll learn yuh that Bull Stockridge is a man of his word, I reckon!" he finished, stepping back to survey his work. "Nobody won't be disturbed no more tonight by yore yawpin' an' yowlin'. Now, boys, what I want to know is how in blazes he got them knots undone? I seen to 'em myself, afore I went out, an' I'll swear they was tied to stay tied, all right."

"He didn't untie 'em boss; he cut 'em," Monte Ruidoso said officiously. "See this here end, slashed right through, as clean as a whistle?" He held out the length of rope that had been stretched across Gale's chest—the first piece Judith Hawley had cut. "An', that bein' the case, he must've had a knife. Me an' Charlie searched him pretty thorough, though."

"He's a cute hombre," Barnett chimed in. "He could mebbe have had it on him all the time. But where's it got to now?"

Gale was wondering about it, too, and dreading the moment when they should discover it. But though they searched diligently enough, it failed to come to light. Stockridge shook his head.

"Beats me," he said. "But, anyways, it ain't in this room now, an' it ain't nowheres on him. An' I'll guarantee personal that he ain't goin' to get loose again. Yuh needn't to worry about havin' yore rest disturbed no more tonight, Mr. Jarvis"—to a white-haired, wheezing old banker from Duluth, who swore that he had never been so upset in his life before and that he did not expect to sleep another wink. Under the same roof with a murderer, by gad! Why, but for the superb courage of Mr. Stanley, the miscreant would have been at large, probably preparing to kill them all!"

The superbly courageous Mr. Stanley solemnly shook hands all around for the fourth or fifth time, and modestly insisted that Mr. Jarvis and Mr. Barton—the gentleman with the whiskey bottle broadsword—were making too much of what he had done. He had played a little football—on the scrub team, of course, being a small man—when he was in college and had learned how to tackle. No, no, he had really done nothing, nothing at all. He was only too thankful that he had happened to be on the spot at the critical time—although, naturally, it was very gratifying that he had been able to serve Mr. Stockridge by preventing the desperado's escape. And what about another little drink or two before they went to bed?

But Mr. Jarvis refused to go to bed, or to leave the room, until the knife had been found. The fellow had used a knife to cut his fetters, hadn't he? Well, what assurance had anybody that he wouldn't do it again? Mr. Jarvis intended to stay right there himself, and watch the villain until morning.

At this announcement, Bull Stockridge's face assumed the hue of a blood-beet. Tony Morello lounged forward from the doorway. "I think your man's mistaken, Stockridge," he said. "Just look at the point of that nail in the chair arm, there, where it's been mended. It's my belief that Chandler used that to saw through the ropes on his wrists, and, once he'd done that, he—"

"But they wasn't sawed, they was cut—clean," interrupted Monte injudiciously. "He couldn't 've done that with a nail—"

"Shut yore mouth, Monte!" roared Stockridge, turning on the half-breed in apoplectic rage. "How dare yuh contradict Mr. Morello? Sure, that's exactly what happened," he added eagerly. "He felt that sharp point when he leaned back, an' got the idea of usin' it 'stead of a knife, which he didn't have. Well, we'll fix that! Take the chair out! Take everything all out—the table, too. He can lay on the floor in the corner for the rest o' the night."

Robert Stanley uttered an exclamation, and began fussily picking up the pieces of the broken highball glass which he had previously dropped.

"Very thoughtlesh of me! Piece of thish glass 'u'd do as well as a knife—sharp as can be!" He felt under the couch, retrieved the last of the splintered fragments, and stood up, swaying a little unsteadily still, regarding the nervous Jarvis with an apologetic smile. "It's all right now, m' friend. We can all have li'l' drink an' then go to bed an' forget all about him. What say we tell Mr. Stockridge good night an' toddle along, eh?"

Telling Mr. Stockridge good night involved shaking hands all round again. It was during this process that Gale, still a little groggy and dazed from the crack he had given his head against the wall, saw a sharp sliver of glass slip from the heap Stanley was carefully balancing on his palm.

No one else saw it; and, as it fell on the blanket covering the couch, there was no sound to draw attention to it. If any of the gang had happened to glance in that direction, they could hardly have helped espying the gleam it caught and reflected from the lamp. Fortunately, however, both Bull Stockridge and Tony Morello were even more anxious than Gale to get the gentleman from Duluth and his friends away from that part of the house. Finally, the window was rebolted, the lamp carried out, and, for the third time, the key turned in the lock of the hall door.

Stygian darkness again, and now no

sounds of music and merriment came in through the shutters. But Gale didn't want to hear any sounds. All he asked was absolute, uninterrupted quiet, until he could carry out the idea which the sight of that sliver of glass had given him. It might take him an hour, or two or three; and he might be dispatched before he had really gotten started, or fail ignominiously as before, when freedom had been almost within reach of his hand; but, at any rate, he meant to make a try for it.

His legs, from the lower thigh to the ankle, had been literally swaddled in coils of rope; but he could make shift to bend his knees. And, though his arms from elbow to wrist were encased in an almost solid hempen handcuff, yet that did not prevent him from rolling over.

It was a slow and painful journey from the rear corner of the room to the couch midway to the opposite wall. Sometimes he rolled; sometimes he wriggled along on his stomach; sometimes he propelled himself a few inches by digging his spur rowels into the frayed piece of carpet and shoving his supine body, head first.

His jaws were aching from the cruel pressure of the wooden gag; his mouth was so dry and parched that it seemed as if his tongue entirely filled it. Perspiration streamed from every pore, and his heart was pumping like an overladen engine when, at last, the top of his head touched the moth-eaten side of the old couch, and the folds of the blanket brushed his streaming face.

He rested a moment or two. Then, laboriously, he drew his feet up under him and dragged himself to his knees, bracing one shoulder against the side of the couch and inching along until he was opposite the place where he had seen the sliver of glass drop.

He could just touch it with the tips of his fingers, and the effort to grasp it resulted not only in a painful cut, but overbalanced him and sent him sliding helplessly to the floor. Again he rested, again he managed to get to his knees—and again the precious bit of glass eluded his efforts to pick it up.

It was not until the fourth attempt that he succeeded in getting its end clipped between his first and middle fingers; and holding on to it when he toppled over. Lying on his side, he shifted the sliver to his right hand, twisted up his wrist, and methodically began to draw the sharp edge back and forth across a coil of the lariat.

Slow work it was, tedious, and excruciatingly painful. His muscles cramped; sharp stabs of agony twinged through his back and shoulders. With every slightest movement of his wrist, the raw flesh burned like fire, and the tight-drawn coils seemed like rows of sharp teeth, gnawing through nerve and sinew. He cut himself half a dozen times, and mingled blood and perspiration dripped from his fingers, making the bit of glass so slippery that it was almost impossible to hold it at all.

But he kept at the self-imposed torture with dogged persistence; and, one by one, the stubborn strands parted and frayed away. The coil he was working on gave a little; then a little more. He shook his arms; it loosened; he could feel the rope giving all the way to his elbows.

His arms were free! But he could not use them at once.

How long had he been lying there, sawing at that rope? He didn't know, but it had seemed like hours. And minutes, even seconds, might be precious. He flexed his numbed fingers until they felt as if they were attached to his hands once more, then attacked the thong which held the gag between his swollen, stiffened jaws. A moment or two sufficed for that, and, withdrawing the chunk of wood gingerly, he moistened his lips and tongue with the blood from his own cut wrists.

It was going to be a little while before he could talk, but he certainly didn't want to have to talk! What he wanted, and all he wanted, was to get to that window, unbolt the shutter, and—

Hark! What was that?

Gale Chandler broke out in a cold perspiration. He had heard no footsteps, not a sound in the corridor; but the key was again being cautiously, softly, turned in the lock!

CHAPTER XVI

Behind the Other Door

WOULD it be a knife thrust, a bullet, or the barrel of a sixgun bent over his head?

And, whatever method was employed, how did Bull Stockridge propose to explain why a man, allegedly caught red-handed at murder, was allowed so much latitude of action that, although he was unarmed, he'd broken loose twice? How was he going to prove that it had been necessary to kill him to prevent his escape the second time?

The owner of the Long Bar Circle might lay down a barrage of meaningless charges sufficient to deceive a bunch of drunken old fools. But Lute Bascomb didn't drink at any time; and he'd almost certainly want to know why, when there were fifteen or twenty able-bodied men about the place, one of them hadn't been stationed as a guard in the prisoner's room.

But Lute Bascomb would be Stockridge's worry. Gale's was the identity of the individual who had just unlocked the door, and what was going to happen when he—or they—came into the room.

If he only had some sort of defensive weapon, Gale told himself, he could put up a fight, and sell his life as dearly as possible. But a splinter of glass a couple of inches long would hardly do much damage. Judith Hawley's knife would have; but he didn't have Judith Hawley's knife, and that was that.

Anyway, he hoped the end would be quick and clean, and braced himself to meet it.

But, amazingly enough, nothing did happen! Nobody entered the room. The door remained closed, and not another sound could he detect in the passage, although he strained his ears.

Gale was dumbfounded. Who under the shining sun—? Why, Judith Hawley, of course! She'd kept wisely out of sight during the late fracas, but undoubtedly she'd heard from someone that no knife had been found, and she had, naturally, assumed that he'd been clever enough to conceal it somewhere. She had left it for him, after all, as she'd said. And then, when the house had quieted down again, she'd slipped back to unlock his door, knowing that he couldn't unfasten it from the inside without making a racket!

She sure was taking plenty of risks on his account—a queer, contradictory character! But all women were queer. They reasoned with their emotions, instead of with their minds, and did things that you couldn't possibly figure on their doing. And where the devil that knife had actually got to—oh, the hell with the knife! He didn't need it. The sliver of glass that fuddled, interfering jackass, Stanley, had accidentally dropped, would do the trick.

Where it had taken minutes to manipulate the sliver successfully with his hands tied behind his back, it took seconds, now that they were free to get a proper grip. He worked with feverish haste, sawing away savagely at the last of his fetters.

At first, he found it hard to stand upright; every muscle and nerve in his cramped legs protested at supporting his weight. But hope is a strong tonic, all the more potent after it has once been tantalizingly withdrawn. The numbness passed off; the thousand little needle pricks in his limbs followed it. In less than five minutes from the time when he had definitely expected his murderers to walk in upon him, Gale himself was walking—rather, he was creeping, with swift stealth, across to the bolted window.

True, the door was unlocked; but he was quite unfamiliar with the house, and he had no mind to wander about through unknown passages and perhaps walk directly into the arms of his enemies. He did know the lay of the land outside. There was a planting of shrubbery along the house wall, and plenty of trees and bushes growing in the yard. The moon would be well down, if it hadn't already set, and the window faced the south. He could reconnoiter from the shelter of the shrubbery, and, if the coast proved clear, dodge across the yard, keeping in the shadows.

But with his fingers on the bolt of the shutter, Gale hesitated. The details of what had happened after Robert Stanley's flying tackle had flung him to the floor,

were pretty hazy in his mind; but one of them stood forth with an odd clarity—the swish of torn branches, the thin, high whine of a bullet from a rifle through the shrubbery, just outside the window.

Of course! That was why Judith had unlocked the door, trusting him to understand that there was someone posted in the yard on watch! He'd tried the windows once before, giving himself away. Now, he'd have to take his chances at finding another, safer exit, through the house.

He crept back to the door, opened it on a crack, and listened intently. No sound anywhere. The passage was as black as pitch on his right hand; but on his left, perhaps fifteen or sixteen feet distant, a cloudy rectangle showed.

He remembered that there were three doors in this corridor—one at the extreme end, and two at the sides. Evidently, that other side door was now partly ajar, and there was a lamp or lantern burning in the room into which it opened. Bad luck, this, for he would have to pass right by it to reach the yard entrance!

Again Gale hesitated, debating whether or not he dared run the risk. But he had been brought in this way; and since it was the only corridor with which he was familiar, he decided that he must. Noiselessly, he stepped out; and, as an afterthought, turned the key in the lock of the door behind him.

Then, keeping close to the wall, and walking on tiptoe, he edged cautiously toward the cloudy band of yellow. It was shining from a room somewhat larger than the one in which he had been confined. An enormous, roll-top desk, littered with account books and papers, was set diagonally across one corner. There were three or four chairs, an ash-strewn table, holding bottles and glasses and a kerosene oil lamp with the smoky wick turned low. So much he saw in the glance that told him that the room was probably Bull Stockridge's private office—and that it was empty!

Gale drew a long breath of relief, took a few more swift steps—and stopped short in his tracks, halted by a brilliant white shaft that played for an instant on the door opening into the yard.

It was a beam from a flash-light, in the hands of someone coming rapidly along the intersecting hall from the main part of the house—coming, doubtless, to prepare him for the inspection of Lute Bascomb!

And he was caught, trapped like a cornered rat, in this damned hallway! He knew that he could not possibly reach the door at its farther end before that searching white beam should flash along its entire length, nor could he make a dash for the yard entrance ahead of him without running directly into the path of the approaching light. Either alternative was suicidal.

In desperation, he turned, bolted back into the office he had just passed, and ducked swiftly round behind the door. By chance it opened in the right direction, and he would be shielded from sight if whoever was coming went straight down the hall.

Only—Gale's heart seemed to lodge in his throat as a hand fell on the latch of the door behind which he was hidden. A voice he well knew said:

"Bring me that key, will you? And get a move on! Do you think I want to hang around here until next Fourth of July?"

Morello and Stockridge, and someone else whom Gale could not immediately identify—and they were coming in! Once they passed the threshold, he would be as much in evidence as the lamp or the desk. The desk! The eyes of the fugitive, frantically sweeping the room for any corner that would afford him a hiding place, lighted on it, and in two silent, cat-like leaps, he was wedging himself between it and the angle of the wall.

It was a tight squeeze, but there was just space enough for him to crouch over behind the high roll-top, and just time enough to do it before Stockridge's heavy boots clumped back along the hall, tramped into the office behind Morello and his companion. The door was closed; the lamp wick was turned up.

"Here's yore key, Tony. I had a mind to

go in an' give him the once over, only yuh said to hurry, an'—"

"Quiet! It's gratifying that you were able to resist the impulse and obey me, for once! This passion for looking in at your friend has become just a little trying, you know, Stockbridge. . . . Sit down, both of you. I want to make it clear, first of all, that there are to be no more slips, of any kind, in this business. You—"

"But, listen, Tony, it wasn't noways our fault that—"

"Stockridge, this whole outrageous mess is your fault!" Morello cut the whining protest off short. "If you hadn't soaked up the few brains you've got with Big Horn whiskey, and started a row with Gale Chandler, the Long Bar Circle would never have been in the picture at all. I warned you to keep on good terms with everybody, and keep them at a distance. The last thing in the world we could afford was to draw attention to this ranch or anybody on it, which you knew as well as I did!"

"Well, but it was just a private fight—"

"I say you had my orders to quarrel with nobody—and you deliberately disobeyed them. You got into a 'private' fight, on a public street! You made public threats, and issued a public challenge—and I had to rustle around to make your apologies and invent a public occasion to demonstrate their sincerity! You had every eye in the County turned on you—and on this place—when you tangled with a gunfighter like Gale Chandler, and—"

"Now, Tony, didn't yuh say yoreself that Chandler was goin' to come in fine, to lay Winter's killin' on? Be fair, Tony! Yuh sprung the idea on me yoreself last night, after yuh raised that damn dick snoopin' an' spyin' round outside. It was yore own plan to fix it so's Chandler wouldn't have no alibi, an'—"

"It wasn't my plan to have you bring him here, to the ranch, where we'd have a lot of prying local officials out asking questions and poking around! Your orders were to shoot Chandler the minute he showed up on the trail, and pack his body back to the Forks. The ranch here wasn't to show in it at all. You had your witnesses to swear they saw him shoot Winter, and that he refused to surrender when—"

"Well, but Tony, he was on the trail a'ready!" Stockridge argued. "When we first seen him, he was bendin' over the dick's carcase. He didn't come ridin' in through the Springs trail the way we looked for him a-tall, Tony, an' when I hollered for him to stick 'em up, he done it, *pronto*."

"Which paralyzed you so that you couldn't pull a trigger, I suppose!" Morello struck his hands lightly together. "And then you challenged him! Why in hell didn't you do your talking with your gun instead of with your mouth? He had his back to you all, didn't he? Well, what better target did you want—unless you expected him to turn around and walk up to you and ask to be shot? Stockridge, if you had a few more brains, you'd be almost half-witted!"

"Now, Tony, don't yuh be too hard on us. We—"

"I'm talking, Stockridge! You were sent to Three Springs to nail Chandler when he came along, because we wanted to pin Winter's killing on him. He didn't come along; he was already there when you spotted him, and so you couldn't kill him! There was a plan—and you couldn't change it! You couldn't shoot straight ahead, instead of a couple of rods to your left! You could have dropped him right across Winter's body, and the thing would have been open and shut. Instead, you bring him along here, to this ranch, of all places, and—"

"But what else could we do?" the rancher pleaded. "We was figurin' on nailin' him right there, only that dude boarder o' Marty Kenniston's come along, an' we didn't dast. He ain't got no use for Chandler, but we couldn't go ahead an' plug the cuss without no excuse, with him watchin'. An' yuh can bet yore bottom dollar Chandler didn't give us no excuse, Tony. He laid low an' played foxy. Oh, it was a rotten break for me, all right, but I knowed if I fetched him here to the ranch, yuh'd easy dope some way for us to get out of it."

Morello passed over this none too subtle flattery.

"What was that infernal idiot fooling around Three Springs for, anyway?" he demanded acidly. "And who told him he could come here as a boarder, without making proper application?"

"Why, I reckon I did," Stockridge admitted reluctantly. "Yuh see, Tony, him an' Jarvis an' old man Barton got thicker'n molasses in January this afternoon—chummin' it up over some dizzy blonde he knowed in Chicago. And nothin' would do but he's to quit the Upside-Down K an' sign on here, where they can all be boys together. See? Jarvis tells him we ain't full up, 'cause Ed Winter's room ain't been took, an' asks me can't his friend have it reserved. An' me, not havin' no notion that the old billygoat won't forget all about it when he's sober, says sure.

"So, when he showed up—I mean the boarder—I was stumped, kinda; but I knowed it wouldn't be a bit o' trouble for yuh to fix up an out for us 'bout Chandler's being here. An' so yuh did"—ingratiatingly. "It was a grand scheme, Tony—"

"And then, by God, *you* go and bungle it!"

"Oh, *I* do?" came a third voice. At the sound of it Gale Chandler almost betrayed himself. It was as if a bucket of icy water had been thrown over him, chilling him from head to foot. "You hauled me down here again just to tell me that? I was wondering how long it would take you to get around to blaming me! Well, if you've anything more to say, get it out of your system, will you. I want to go to bed."

"Why yes my dear Judith, I have something more to say to you." Morello's tone had altered; it was bland now, and smooth, and there was an ominous purring quality in it which made Gale realize that he had made no mistake in his initial estimate of the man. "In fact, I have several things to say. One of them is that I'm not at all surprised when our genial 'front,' Stockridge blunders; I expect a certain amount of that sort of thing from him, and manage to discount it.

"But when you, my dear Judith, do something stupid, my curiosity is piqued to know just why. The only thing I am quite sure of is that it's not because you *are* stupid."

"I don't get you, Tony," Judith Hawley returned indolently. "What's your kick? I thought I played up pretty well. Mister Big Casino Chandler lapped up everything I handed him, kissed me chastely on the cheek in gratitude for turning him loose, and was all set to make his getaway through the window. If that besotted fool, Stanley, hadn't blundered in just at the wrong moment and started playing college football with him, the boys would have cut him down in his tracks before he'd run a yard."

"Yes. Quite," Morello's suave purr concurred. "But it seems to have escaped you, Judith, my dear, that if you'd removed this key from the lock, the besotted fool, Stanley, couldn't have blundered in at the wrong moment or any other moment. Also, if you had left the knife in the room, as per your instructions, there would have been no mystery as to how the ropes were cut, and I shouldn't have been obliged to come forward with a silly suggestion that wouldn't have fooled anybody except a banker.

"Of course, the kindest construction I can put on two serious slips of the sort, my dear girl, is that you were a little careless. But it's not like you to be careless, Judith."

"Say, what the hell are you driving at, Tony?" demanded the woman angrily. "Hinting that I meant to double-cross you? You know damn well you don't believe anything of the kind."

"Why certainly, I don't." Morello's laugh was quietly amused. "Certainly I don't, my dear. As I told you before, you aren't stupid. The fact that you're still alive and in apparently good health ought to be sufficiently reassuring to you."

Judith's chair scraped back; she was on her feet.

"What's the idea of talking to me like that, anyway?" she wanted to know, her voice thickening. "You wouldn't have dared pull that line a week ago, Tony, and you can't tell me you would! No, I'm not stupid—and I'm not sound asleep, either! I'm wise to the reason you thought it was such a hell of a good idea to pin that dick's

kick-off on Chandler. Kill two birds with one stone, eh? Take the 'win' out of Winter and let the 'Gale' blow itself out!" She laughed coarsely, excitedly, at the cheap play on words. "You're right, I'm not stupid—not stupid enough to miss the play you've been making for that moron milkmaid you—"

She stopped without finishing her sentence, silenced, Gale judged, by something she had seen in Tony Morello's face.

But Bull Stockridge, striking a match for his pipe, quite as evidently did not see it. He let out a delighted guffaw.

"Seen yuh deal from the bottom of the deck before, has she, Tony?" he chuckled. "Bet there ain't much gets a-past Lady Judith! But who'd 've thought she'd get her back up an' spit, 'count o' yo're oozin' around Kit Kenniston! She's jealous, by Gawd, that's what she is, Tony! Lady Judith jeal—" And then Bull Stockridge's voice trailed off into silence, too. There was a hush in the room that made Gale feel that the sound of his own heartbeats must be plainly audible to the unseen trio.

Presently, Tony Morello spoke in brittle, metallic tones.

"I think we have exhausted that subject, if you please," he said, "and it will be unnecessary to re-open it at any future time. Do I make myself clear? Very well, then. But let me add something which I think you already understand: What I want, I take. And"—after a significant pause—"and what I do not want, I know how to get rid of."

"Tony!" Judith Hawley's voice was thin and thready, and shaken with something very like panic. "Tony, you didn't mean—"

"I didn't mean you to stay up until this late hour merely to indulge in a social chat with you, no, my dear," he said silkily. "This is business. Suppose we get on with it? Stockridge"—and now Morello spoke with harsh incisiveness—"I over-rated your intelligence when I trusted you to make use of the slight amount of gray matter nature endowed you with. I have, it seems, been trying to cut diamonds with a cheese knife."

"Aw, say, now, Tony—" the Long Bar Circle man mumbled.

"However, you will proceed to carry out a few simple orders, Stockridge, which will not require you to think," Morello went on, paying no attention to the interruption. "I don't want you to think, but to act, and do exactly as you are told. You understand that Chandler must be dead before Bascomb arrives in the morning?

"Very well. Just about daylight, you will go into that room with a cup of coffee and some biscuits. You will close the door, drop the plate and cup, draw your gun, and shoot him through the heart. Then you will cut his ropes, and pitch them into a corner—with this knife. It can be identified later."

"My good goda'mighty, I should say it could!" ejaculated Stockridge. "Why, it belongs to One-Eyed Mose, chief! Lute Bascomb 'll know it in a minute, an' so'll a lot o' folks. It'll look like Mose 'd been responsible for Chandler gettin' loose, won't it?"

Morello laughed softly.

"That," he said, "may be unfortunate for One-Eyed Mose. But neither of the Ruidosos is very reliable, I regret to say. They know too much, and they talk too much. I shouldn't feel any very great grief if Bascomb arrested both of them, and lodged them in jail. Of course, Stockridge, if you feel that you would be easier to bribe than the 'breed, we can make use of your knife!"

Bull Stockridge sputtered an incoherent protest.

"Then suppose we let it stand as I've directed," Morello said. "Mose won't talk in jail; he'll be expecting to be liberated and taken care of. Well, he will be—taken care of. You understand now, do you, Stockridge? About daylight—"

"Why not now? What the hell's the use o' waitin'?"

"Oh, isn't there anything but lard in that skull of yours, Stockridge?" Judith Hawley broke in, apparently eager to regain the ground her temerity had cost her. "What about the sound of the shot? What about the length of time Chandler's been dead when the doctor looks him over? I don't wonder you make Tony tired! Do as you're told!

"And, Tony," she added eagerly, "don't you think perhaps he'd ought to mash the front of Chandler's face in with a gun-barrel before he shoots? It'll save inventing an explanation for the gag, in case Bascomb wants to know why it was used."

"A good idea, my dear, and worthy of you," applauded Morello. "Of course, Stockridge has been on guard all night in the room, and has only just left it to get some breakfast. A gag would be unnecessary, as you suggest. Smash him across the face first, Stockridge, then shoot—and give the alarm. That's all."

CHAPTER XVII

Surprises Pile Up

HUNCHED over in the cramped, narrow angle between the wall and the back of the big roll-top desk, Gale Chandler almost held his breath until, after blowing out the lamp, the three conspirators left the office. Then he heard their footsteps grow fainter and finally die away altogether down the corridor leading to the main part of the house.

He had little fear that Tony Morello's orders would be disobeyed again; the probabilities were that no one would be stirring about in the west wing until daylight. But probability was not certainty, and he did not for a minute relax his vigilance.

He waited in the stuffy darkness until absolute silence wrapped the big house. Then, as quietly as he could, he wriggled out from his hiding place and crept over to the door, peering out into the gloom of the long hall, watching and listening.

The startling conversation he had just overheard had served to clarify much that had been rather hazy and confused in his mind. With the exception of one thing, the revelations had served but to confirm the suspicions which he had already formed. But that one thing, proof positive of a treachery so calculating and cold-blooded as to be almost inhuman, he still found it hard to credit.

Judith Hawley had meant to betray him! So far from pitying his unhappy plight, she had deliberately tried to send him to his death and, but for the chance interruption by Stanley and the inquisitive Angela, she would have succeeded!

She had had him completely fooled. Puzzled though he had been at first by the seeming inconsistency of her behavior, this extraordinary woman had, he confessed to himself with shame, experienced but little real difficulty in pulling the wool over his eyes. He had been distrustful of her from the first; yet by reciting a highly improbable story, feigning a sympathetic sob or two, bestowing a lingering caress from her white, perfumed fingers, she had easily beguiled him.

And now—what? Did the unlocking of his prison door for the second time mean that he was expected to try to make his way out through the yard entrance, and were members of the gang waiting for him there? Unforeseen accidents had enabled him to take the first and second tricks in this game of hide-and-seek with death; but he couldn't expect his luck to last forever. What—

The hair on the back of his neck crawled and prickled as a low, guarded whisper came to him through the gloom:

"*S-st!* Chandler! This way—and keep quiet, for your life!"

Instinctively, Gale's hand dropped to the holster where his gun should have been—and wasn't. The whisper came again:

"Quick, Chandler! It's not a trap, man, but your only chance. Follow me, this way. Here—put your hand out!"

So intense was the darkness in the narrow passageway that Gale could discern nothing save a vague, indistinct shape a couple of feet to the right of the doorway where he crouched. Not a trap? His only chance? There was the tap of some hard, heavy object against his arm. He put out his hand, almost automatically, and his fingers closed on the butt of a forty-five! It was his own gun; he knew the feel of it instantly.

"They're watching the yard door, but you can make it through the cellar. Come along—softly!" The shape was gone, swallowed up in the darkness; and even Gale's trained ears could not detect the sound of its going. Not a footstep, not the creak of a board!

Absolutely nonplussed, bewildered by this unexpected development, Gale followed, gliding silently toward the rear of the hall, where a current of stale air, cool and smelling of damp earth, met his nostrils. He stepped through the narrow doorway, heard the faint click of the latch falling into place behind him.

His invisible mentor spoke again, in a rapid undertone.

"There's a window right opposite the bottom of a ladder here; I've pried it up. And here's your other gun—they're both loaded. You'll find your horse tied out behind the hay barn. Don't let any grass sprout under his feet, Chandler! Sorry I had to put on that drunk act with you, but I couldn't let you open that shutter. Four of the gang were laying for you outside in the yard!"

"Yeah, I know it now," muttered Gale. It seemed to him that he must be dreaming, or that his senses were playing tricks on him. For it was unbelievable that his guide could actually be the smug, silly, drunken little fool, Robert Stanley! And yet—it was!

He was not drunk, either, nor showing the slightest sign of ever having been drunk! The small but powerful flashlight in his hand flickered across his face, and showed it intent, grim, and steady-eyed.

"So yuh meant for me to find that piece of glass, did yuh?" Gale said. "An' it was you unlocked the door a while back?"

The other nodded.

"Best I could do; thought you'd be wide awake enough to get it. There's the ladder." The beam from his flashlight pointed out the uprights and the topmost rung, showing above a narrow trap-door in the flooring. "Trot, now; you've no time to lose. You'll find the coast clear, I think. They won't be expecting you to make a break for it this time; I'm not on their schedule."

"But who in the name of—"

"Later, Chandler—later. Explanations 'll have to keep—except that I'm out of it, and never was in it, and you haven't seen me or talked to me, and you don't know a damned thing about me! That goes, no matter who asks you, understand? Now, light out of here, will you? Make a beeline for the Forks and surrender yourself to the sheriff or his deputy, Tommy Carr. Get yourself locked in a jail cell as quick as God 'll let you—and stay there! You don't know what you're up against, young fellow!"

(*To be continued in the next issue*)

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF MARCH 3, 1933, OF RANCH ROMANCES, PUBLISHED SEMI-MONTHLY AT NEW YORK, N. Y., FOR OCTOBER 1, 1933.

State of New York, County of New York, ss:

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared E. F. Warner, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the publisher of the Ranch Romances, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, E. F. Warner, 1088 Park Ave., New York, N. Y.; Editor, Fanny Ellsworth, 52 West 12th St., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Fanny Ellsworth, 52 West 12th St., New York, N. Y.; Business Managers, E. F. Warner, Pres., 1088 Park Ave., New York, N. Y.; Elmer J. Chambers, Treas., 110 Old Army Road, Scarsdale, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual, must be given.) Warner Publications, Inc., 578 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.; E. F. Warner, 1088 Park Ave., New York, N. Y.; Joseph P. Shea, 551 Fifth Ave., New York, N. Y.; Elmer J. Chambers, 110 Old Army Road, Scarsdale, N. Y.; R. P. Holland, Gaylor Road, Scarsdale, N. Y.; Mardick Corp., c/o L. Kaplan, 122 E. 42 St., New York, N. Y.; Stockholders, Mardick Corp., Leo Kaplan, 122 E. 42 St., New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

E. F. Warner, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 25th day of September, 1933. Elmer J. Chambers. (My commission expires March 30, 1934.)

Shorty Cupid

By Eric Howard

Shorty said his boss was too shy to do his own courting; but when the big moment arrived, the young rancher proved himself as ardent as a lover as he was courageous as a cowman.

WHEN Steve Holden, looking for strays, turned into the Kootenac road, trouble was the last thing in the world he expected to encounter. It was a warm, quiet day, with no breeze stirring the aspens on the low hills, no chill coming down from the snow-capped peaks beyond. Steve rode slowly, drawing great drafts of the dry, thin air into his lungs, quietly enjoying the rhythmic stride of his horse, the peace of the range, and his own sense of well-being.

But there was trouble straight ahead—imminent, dangerous. Steve halted, and his lean body was tense and straight in the saddle. Below him, in the valley that was like a cup of green, through which ran the wagon tracks of the Kootenac road, he saw the sheepherder's wagon that belonged to the newcomer, Jeff Graham. It stood near the water hole. Beyond the wagon, Graham's sheep grazed, watched by two dogs. His mules, which had drawn the wagon home when Graham and his daughter had come to establish themselves on this homestead, were hobbled not far off.

All this was familiar enough. Steve had seen the Grahams, Jeff and Nora, fairly often since they had come here. At first, like all cattlemen, he had been inclined to resent the invasion of the sheepman. But Graham was a reasonable and honest man. His own section of land, with the water hole, would carry the small flock of sheep. He intended to fence his land as soon as possible, and meanwhile he would see to it that his flock did not feed on the cattle range. It was not as if the country were being overrun with sheep. Graham was

only one man, with a small flock, and his presence here would not injure the range. This Steve had come to see, but others had not seen it.

"Let him stay," they argued, "and the whole range will be taken by sheepherders. Most of this land is open for entry, and once they start comin', there'll be no stoppin' them."

And Trem Long, always the leader of the wilder spirits, promised with a swagger that he would take care of the Grahams.

Now, as he looked down upon the scene, Steve Holden saw Trem and a few of his men. He heard Trem's loud, mirthless laughter, heard the orders he shouted to his men. Then Steve saw what they intended to do. They were tying their ropes to the covered wagon, the Grahams' only home; and they meant to destroy it.

The girl, Nora Graham, stood in the doorway at the rear of the wagon, erect and defiant. Her dress was as blue as the sky, and in her posture there were courage and strength. Her father, Steve saw, was seated on a boulder a little distance away, holding his head in his hands.

Steve's own success in building up his little ranch had been partly due to the fact that he had avoided trouble with Trem Long. It was easy to have trouble with Trem, for he was always seeking it. Steve had shunned it without in any way acknowledging the other man's power. The wise thing for him to do, now, was to ride away. The Grahams were nothing to him. Their fight was not his fight. If he antagonized Trem Long, his own difficulties—in holding and developing his ranch—would be immeasurably increased. Steve thought of this calmly and coolly, for he was one to weigh all sides of a problem.

But he knew, even as these reflections passed through his mind, that he must interfere. He could not allow Trem Long to injure these poor, helpless, sheepherding nesters without making some effort to help them. Just what he could do, with Long and his men there, he didn't know; but go to their aid, he must.

He had not halted on the rise more than a few minutes, only long enough to survey the scene before him and to consider his part in it. Then he rode down, at a steady lope.

Trem and his men looked up at his appearance, and waited for him to come nearer.

"Hi, Holden!" Trem called. "Come an' git in on this! We're celebratin' the freedom of the range. We're goin' to pull this damned sheepherder's house on wheels to pieces an' scatter the pieces from here to the Border. Hook yore lariat on a wheel an' let's go."

Trem's speech was thick. He was more than half drunk; so were his men. They had been to Kootenac, Steve decided, and had thought of this form of amusement on their way home. Trem was mean and dangerous when he had been drinking. Well, he was always mean; but drink intensified his natural attributes.

Steve glanced at the girl, standing on the steps that led into the house on wheels. Her cheeks flamed, and her eyes were defiant. When their glances crossed, there was no appeal in hers.

"She's got spunk," Steve thought. "She thinks I'm goin' to join 'em, an' she's too proud to ask me not to, to beg for help."

He glanced at her father, and saw that his jaw was badly swollen. Trem's heavy fist had done that, no doubt. Anger burned in Steve's heart as he looked at Trem's fixed grin, which bared his broken teeth, and into his small, piggish eyes.

But his bronzed face was impassive, save for the deeper glow in his gray eyes.

"I reckon yuh boys don't mean it," he said softly. "I reckon yo're jest funnin'."

Trem swore. "Funnin'? Hell, no! We're goin' to do jest what I said. We're goin' to wreck this outfit an' see to it that no sheepherdin' mess ever clutters up our range. Hook on yore ropes, boys, an' let's proceed."

"Lookahere, Trem," Steve said quietly. "Graham's got a right an' title to this place. He ain't bothered anybody, an' his little flock won't hurt us cowmen. Yuh'd oughta give him a chance."

"I've heard all that before," snapped Trem. "But I ain't listenin'. If yuh don't

like what we aim to do, Holden, yuh can mosey or yuh can look on. It's all the same to us. We mean business."

His men laughed and Trem smirked proudly, overlooking the gleam that came in Steve's eyes.

The latter swung down from his saddle and rolled a cigarette.

"I reckon I wouldn't do it, Trem," he suggested.

"Huh? Why not? Say," he exploded, "are yuh aimin' to try to stop us?"

He glared at Steve for a moment, and then uttered a drunken laugh.

"I guess yuh know better'n that, Holden," he grunted when his mirth had subsided. "Mebbe yuh'd better ride on your way. What yuh don't see won't concern yuh."

"I'm stayin' here. Better take yore ropes an' ride off, boys. These folks haven't done anythin' to you. An' yuh can't mess up their possessions this way."

"Can't!" bellowed Trem. "Why in hell can't we? Say, Holden, I been waitin' for the time when I'd have to tell yuh a thing or two. If this is it, yuh'll—"

Trem spurred his horse forward, his quirt raised, his face distorted in anger. Steve stood perfectly still, his eyes fixed on those of the other. He heard Nora's stifled cry as the quirt in Trem's hand started down.

"Hold it, Trem!" snapped Steve.

Magically, a gun had leaped into his hand. "If that quirt ever touches me, I'll sure kill yuh," he announced grimly.

As Trem halted, his horse rearing, Steve stepped aside and faced his companions.

"Take yore ropes an' ride," he ordered crisply.

None of the others had attempted to draw. None would attempt it now that Steve held his gun upon them. They had looked upon him, before, as a quiet, ordinary rancher, content with grubbing out a living on a small spread. But suddenly, in their opinion, his stature had increased. They recognized the fearless, deadly gleam in his eyes, the grim set of his lips; and they had witnessed his lightning speed with the gun.

Shamefaced, suddenly sober, the men removed their ropes from the wagon wheels. Only Trem felt called upon to bluster.

"Turnin' into a gunman, huh?" he snarled. "Who made you sheriff or marshal, Holden? Who elected you to protect all the rotten, sheepherdin' scum—an' their women—on this here range?"

Steve sprang forward, reached up and clutched Trem's thick shoulder.

"You hold yore tongue, yuh sot!" For the first time, anger was expressed in his voice.

He pulled Trem half out of the saddle, then suddenly released him and slapped him sharply.

In facing Trem, however, he had neglected to cover his companions. As he turned back to them, a rope settled over his arms and was drawn suddenly taut.

Trem let out a bellow of delight. "Drag him from here to hell!" he cried. "Drag him, Slim!"

Steve was jerked from his feet and carried along the rough ground. The girl screamed, the dogs barked, and Trem's roaring laugh sounded above the other noises. While he cursed himself for letting his anger throw him off-guard, Steve clung to his gun. Bracing himself rigidly, lying on one side, he raised the gun as well as his roped arms would permit, and fired, his vision clouded by dust.

Twice he fired at the man who held the rope, and then again. Behind him he heard the other whooping riders. His body felt as if flame had scorched it. And then the rope suddenly slackened; he quickly freed his arms, and stood up. As the dust settled, he saw Slim drop from the saddle, wounded.

He heard Trem's oath and turned to face him. The hombre fired and Steve felt the shock of lead as the bullet struck him and whirled him around. Already weak, he sank to his knees. Vainly he tried to lift his gun now. He saw Trem slow down and aim. He fired, and knew that his bullet dug into the earth a few feet away. He could not lift his wrist.

Then he heard the sharper crack of a rifle, and he saw Trem's hat fly from his head. He looked back. Nora Graham had armed herself and was shooting at Trem

while the latter swore savagely and rode on to join his companions.

Dazed, Steve sent a futile shot after him, and then sank down, full-length, upon the ground. He was dimly aware, a moment later, of strong arms encircling him, of being lifted up, of hearing a girl's clear, sweet voice. Then all was dark.

WHEN he awakened, he was lying in a bunk in the covered wagon that the Grahams called home. He stirred and the springs of the bunk creaked. Nora had been sitting on the steps, but at the sound she got up and entered the wagon.

Steve stared at her, as if he had never seen her before. He observed, as if for the first time, the deep blue of her eyes, beneath level brows. He saw the brown softness of her hair, in which the sun made gold appear. He looked at her sweet, gentle mouth, and saw the hint of a dimple in her cheek. But she did not smile. She looked at him very solemnly, her eyes full of concern, until his gaze disconcerted her and brought a warm flush to her cheeks. Long lashes veiled her eyes, and she turned away to get him a glass of water.

He took it from her, as she knelt beside him, and gulped all of it. Then he smiled.

"I sure let myself in for it, didn't I? Did they ride away?"

She nodded.

"I guess you drove 'em off," he said, "after I let 'em put a rope on me. I should 'a' known better, but Trem made me so blamed mad—" He turned over, to look at her, and winced in pain.

"Whew! I almost forgot they burned most of the hide off me. But I reckon I'm all right."

He started up, but the girl gently thrust him back. At that moment her father appeared in the doorway and Steve looked up at him.

"Take it easy, lad," said Graham. "Yuh'd best spend the night here. Yuh ain't able to ride."

"Got to get home," Steve muttered. "I let Shorty, my one hand, go to Kootenac. There's work to be done. Heck, I never been so I couldn't ride."

He swung out of the bunk and stood up stiffly; but his face went white as he felt the pain again.

"If yuh've got to, I s'pose yuh've got to," agreed Graham. "But Nora's cookin'. Yuh'd better eat."

Steve nodded his agreement. Graham looked out of the door, saw his daughter at the campfire some distance away, and spoke in a lower tone.

"I'm sure sorry yuh got mixed up in this," he said. "I been expectin' trouble with Long, but they caught me by surprise, 'fore I could lay hands on a gun. Long knocked me cold, an' when I come to I was too weak to fight. Spittin' blood, yuh know. Nora don't know about that," he whispered cautiously. "But that's why I came here—the climate. Where we lived I was worse; it was damp an' swampy. But it looks like we can't stay. Long won't let us."

His voice was hoarse, and he began to cough. Steve observed his high, thin shoulders, the telltale touch of color in his cheeks, and his general air of weakness.

"Don't worry about Long!" Steve said firmly. "I reckon there's plenty of men in the country that will see to it Long don't bother yuh."

The older man shook his head. "Can't fight him. Can't stay. It's too big a risk. There's Nora. If Long finishes me, Nora's goin' to be all alone. I guess I'd better move on, give up this claim an' take my sheep somewhere else."

"Come and get it!" sang Nora, then, in a clear, sweet voice.

Broiled mutton and Dutch-oven biscuits and black coffee, served outdoors, made a pleasant feast, in spite of the worry that enveloped the Grahams. Nora spoke seldom, but saw to it that Steve was well supplied with food. As he watched her move from the fire to the rough table, her grace and competence charmed him; and he caught himself imagining her in the kitchen of his own log ranch house. The color deepened in his cheeks as her gaze rested upon him, and she smiled quickly.

When he mounted his horse, she stood beside him for a moment.

"Thanks," she said. "I hope—I hope Trem Long doesn't give you any trouble."

"No danger, I reckon. But if he comes back here an' bothers yuh, I hope yuh'll let me know, as quick as yuh can."

She nodded, and then watched him ride off.

"Que valiente!" she murmured, and softly hummed a song she had learned from a Mexican sheepherder employed by her father. For the first time since they had come to this hostile region, Nora had found friendliness. And as she lived over the events of that day, Steve Holden became a hero of romance.

Her father put his arm over Nora's shoulder as she went back to the covered wagon. She saw that he was brooding.

"We'll have to move on," he said at last. "Long an' plenty of others will make trouble. I thought they'd let me alone, seein' I didn't intend to use any range but this section. But Long used to use this water hole. He never expected anybody to file on it. That's why he's on the prod —that an' his natural meanness. Well, there's plenty of country left. We better go where sheep ain't considered poison."

Nora said nothing. She knew it was useless to argue with her father when he felt beaten, and she knew more about the state of his health than he believed. But her round chin was firm, and her lips tightened. She had dreamed of the house that would arise here, and of what they could make of the homestead. She refused to consider defeat. If Trem Long came again, she meant to have her rifle within reach.

The sound of a loping horse on the Kootenac road, came to them; and Nora ran for her rifle. But a moment later, as the rider approached, she recognized the dun horse ridden by Shorty Harris, Steve's one cowboy.

"Trem Long ain't been here yet?" demanded Shorty excitedly.

"Yes," said Nora. "He's been and gone."

"Then howcome you folks are all right? I heard in Kootenac that he was ridin' this way, with his men. I got a late start, but I thought mebbe I could help."

Briefly, Nora told him of Steve's part in the episode. Shorty's freckled face broke into a smile, and he ran his hand through his thatch of sandy hair.

"Say, I'm sure glad ol' Steve was on hand! He's a match for a half-dozen Longs." Shorty laughed happily, and added in another tone, "Course, I was as bad as the rest of 'em, when I first saw yore sheep. But when I heard what Trem aimed to do, why, it riled me. Trem's a bully, an' a mean one. I don't like sheep any better'n he does," he grinned apologetically, "but it ain't up to Trem to bother you folks."

"Sheep aren't so bad, when you get used to them," Nora smiled. "Dad was always a cowman, until— I only hope this doesn't cause trouble for Steve—Mr. Holden."

"Don't yuh worry about Steve, ma'am. If Trem knows what's good for him, he'll keep away from Steve. I better be gettin' home. All scratched up thataway, Steve won't feel like doin' chores."

With a wave of his hand, Shorty rode off.

IN spite of his cheerful words, Shorty was afraid of what he might find at the ranch. It was true that Steve was more than a match for six Trem Longs; but if Trem and his followers chose to attack him without warning, Steve might not have a chance. However, when he rode up to the house and dismounted, he saw Steve hobbling about.

"Hey," he called cheerfully, "yuh go in there an' slap some liniment an' salve on yore blistered hide. I been hearin' things about yuh. Who appointed you protector of gals an' old sheepherders, anyway? Yuh sure got Nora Graham thinkin' yo're a hero. I tried to tell her yuh wasn't much-account, but she wouldn't listen."

Steve hurled a water bucket at the cowboy, and Shorty ducked.

"No foolin', Steve. Like I been tellin' yuh for weeks, Nora's a girl in a thousand."

"I s'pose yuh been tellin' her that, too."

"Sure!" Shorty boasted. "I allowed I'd turn sheepherder to be near her."

"Huh!" said Steve. "Last month, it was that black-haired gal in the Kootenac

Kafé." For some reason, he was angry with Shorty.

"Yeah, I did kind o' like her. But Nora—gee! Go on in there an' peel. I'll tend to things. Nora told me about the fight."

As Steve turned toward the house, Shorty called, "Yuh figger Trem will show up here?"

"He might," growled Steve.

"Sure, he might," Shorty observed cheerfully.

But Trem did not appear, and the next morning Shorty, observing that Steve was stiff, suggested that he go in search of the strays Steve had not found.

Steve nodded.

"An' while I'm ridin'," Shorty added, "I might as well go past the Grahams', jest to see that they're all right. Huh? Looks like we oughta do that every day or so."

Steve growled inaudibly, but interposed no objection. Grinning, Shorty rode away. And Steve, working at a succession of odd jobs all that day, was a prey to jealous thoughts. Unlike himself, Shorty was something of a lady's man. Never before had there been any suggestion of rivalry between the two friends. But never before had Steve known that a girl's eyes could hold so much of courage and warmth, or that her arms could be both soft and strong.

He had made this discovery too late. Shorty had a way with him; girls liked his gay, carefee smile, the songs he sang, and the merry words that came easily to his lips. Shorty had discovered Nora's beauty while Steve had been blind. He could not blame Shorty, nor Nora; he blamed himself. And he wished that Trem Long would ride down upon him in a fighting mood; he would have enjoyed a fight, just then.

Trem didn't appear, however; and day after day Shorty rode over to the Grahams', spent an hour or two there, and later reported to Steve that Nora was a wonderful cook as well as a beautiful girl. Steve himself did not go near the homesteaders.

"Nora asked about yuh," Shorty once reported.

"What did she say?"

"Wanted to know why yuh hadn't been over. I told her yuh were too busy. She kind o' laughed an' wondered howcome I could get off. I told her yuh wouldn't work yore poor underpaid hand the way yuh worked yoreself. That's right, ain't it?"

"Yuh'll be overworked, plenty, before long, cowboy. We're stringin' a new fence around the north pasture, an' I aim to develop that spring."

During the following week, they worked steadily. Shorty did not visit the Grahams, and they decided that Trem Long would cause no trouble. On Saturday, the cowboy announced that he would like to go to Kootenac, if Steve could spare him for the day.

"Go ahead," said Steve. "If yuh run into Trem, don't start anything. I s'pose yuh'll see the Grahams?"

"Sure."

Steve wouldn't admit it, but he wanted nothing so much as to see Nora. With Shorty gone, and the work done for the week, his ranch seemed lonely. He was thoroughly tired of his own, and Shorty's, cooking. He wished he had gone to Kootenac with the puncher. Now that there seemed no prospect of an attack from Trem Long, it would have been safe to leave the place for a day. But Shorty had been a little mysterious about going to town, and had evidently wished to go alone.

He was mooning before the house, absently repairing a bridle, when he heard a strange sound on the road below the corral. A coyote seemed to have ventured near the buildings. Steve sprang up to secure his rifle, and saw one of the Grahams' shaggy sheep dogs. The animal emitted a combination bark and howl, lifting its head to the sky. It seemed afraid to approach nearer the house. But when Steve appeared and spoke to the dog, its plumed tail moved and it ran forward. When close to the man, it leaped and barked, ran away and then came back.

While the dog barked protestingly, Steve entered the house, buckled on his gun and snatched his hat. The animal followed him to the corral. When he had bridled

and saddled his horse, it ran ahead, barking and leaping.

Steve wondered if the dog had been sent to summon him, and, if so, how it had been able to find him, since it had never been here before. And as he rode swiftly, he wondered what had happened at the Graham claim. Shorty must have been there hours before. If he had gone on to Kootenac, and if Trem Long had again visited the Grahams, they would be alone and defenseless. This was Saturday, just the day Trem might select for another attack upon them.

As he rode, Steve rebuked himself for not having given the Grahams more protection. He might have moved them to his own place, at least until there was no possibility of Trem annoying them. He had not done what he should have done. Even if Nora favored Shorty, that did not excuse him.

When he reached the rise from which he had seen Trem Long and his companions with their ropes on the Graham wagon, he uttered an exclamation and rode swiftly down to the water hole.

The wagon itself was wrecked beyond repair. Trem had done, this time, what he had wanted to do before. The bedding, clothing, cooking utensils and supplies that were all the Grahams owned, were scattered over the ground. The wagon wheels had been torn off and broken, the canvas ripped into shreds, and the wagon box smashed.

Steve surveyed the ruins with a cold gleam in his eye. A crisp oath came to his lips, while the dog continued to howl forlornly.

The other dog, guarding the sheep, barked a greeting. The woollies were bunched, as if the dog had had to keep them from stampeding. And Steve saw a dozen dead ewes and lambs lying beside the water hole.

But where was Nora? Her father?

He heard a faint groan, and saw the dog run to the ripped canvas. The animal pawed at it and dragged it away from Graham.

Steve ran to the side of the sheepman and bent over him. Wounded, Graham was able to rise on his elbow and whisper to Steve:

"They took Nora! Knocked out Shorty an' took him an' Nora—that way! Long an' his bunch. Drunker'n before, Steve—an' Long claims my sheep dirtied his spring, so's his cattle can't drink. He lies. But he's got Nora, Steve. An' Shorty. They'll kill Shorty, sure. An' then—"

His whisper became a moan, but he roused himself to plead: "Go after 'em! Yuh—"

"I aim to, old-timer," Steve promised. "Jest where did they go? Yuh know?"

"Said somethin' about headin' for Long's lower ranch, over there, where the old shack is."

Steve nodded. Then, quickly, he made a shade for the old man and placed a canteen of water beside him.

"I'll go, an' I'll get back as quick as I can. Yuh take it easy."

Mounting, he ordered the dog, which had started with him, to remain at its master's side.

THE old shack, on Trem Long's lower ranch, which he had acquired by foreclosing a mortgage and driving out the owners some time before Steve had bought his ranch, was surrounded by cottonwoods in a little hollow. Long used it often, and report had it that some of his men operated a still there.

Even with hard riding, it was an hour before Steve reached the broken-down fence that marked the boundary of the place. Then he proceeded slowly. During that ride he put out of his mind any jealousy and bitterness he had felt toward Shorty. The cowboy was his loyal friend, and no doubt he had done his best to prevent the attack on the Grahams. Now he was in danger, as well as Nora. Steve knew what he was up against. A dozen men, perhaps, had helped Trem Long; they were as drunk and as savage as Trem himself. He didn't know what chance he would have against them.

He advanced cautiously, reminding himself that at his last encounter with Trem he had allowed his anger to throw him off guard. No sentry appeared to halt his

progress, and he neared the shack without being observed.

Then he dismounted and proceeded on foot. At a ramshackle shed, near the house, there were four horses. If Trem had had other companions, they had gone on. Hope sprang in Steve's heart. If Nora and Shorty were there, with only Trem and another man, there was more than a chance that he could rescue them. He waited near the shed for a time, listening intently. But for some moments no sound came from the shack.

Puzzled by the silence, Steve stepped forward. He halted suddenly as Shorty's unmistakable whistle came to his ears. It was as gay and cheerful as ever, but there was a high note, repeated twice, that meant he was calling to Steve. Often, before, he had used it as a signal. Now he introduced it into the tune he was whistling.

Steve grinned. Good old Shorty! Trust him to use his head.

The whistling suddenly stopped, and Steve heard Trem Long's bellow: "Cut out that noise, or I'll crack yuh over the head again! I told yuh to shut up an' I meant it. We don't want no comp'ny till the boys get back from wreckin' Holden's place an' bring him here to join yuh!"

Defiantly, Shorty whistled again, and Steve heard the sound of a blow as it landed.

He ran forward, then, gun drawn, and halted behind a cottonwood that stood directly before the open door of the shack. So they were going to wreck his place! And bring him here! His lips closed grimly, and his eyes were like steel. It was indeed time that he put an end to Trem Long's dominance in this region. He had sidestepped him long enough, hoping to avoid trouble.

He saw Long's thick body move past the open door. He could have dropped him there, easily. But he must give him a chance. Presently, probably in obedience to Trem's command, another man came out of the shack, carrying a water pail, and headed for the well. It was the one called Slim, who had dragged Steve behind his horse and whom Steve had wounded.

Steve glanced toward the shack, saw that Long was seated with his back to the door, and then darted through the trees. As Slim bent over the well, intent upon drawing up water, Steve reached him. There was a sharp thud as his gun barrel struck Slim's head, and the man slumped.

Steve jerked his gun from its holster, dropped it into the well, and took up the pail. He walked unhesitatingly toward the shack, entered and set the pail on the floor. Trem Long half turned, glanced over his shoulder, and stared in surprise into the gun held steady in Steve's hand.

"I heard yuh wanted to see me, Long."

"Slim!" cried Trem, as he backed toward the wall.

"Slim's hangin' over the well," said Steve. "For two bits I'd 'a' dropped him in it."

His eyes did not waver from Long, and he could not see Shorty and Nora.

"Nora—Shorty—yuh here?" he asked, when they did not speak. "Yuh all right?"

There was no response from Shorty, only a muffled cry from the girl. Steve glanced toward the sound, saw that she was bound to a chair and gagged. He moved quickly toward Trem Long, snatched the latter's gun and tossed it through a window.

"Sit down there an' don't move!" he snapped.

Then he bent over Nora, untying the gag and the rope that held her. Shorty, he saw, was lying against the wall; Trem had knocked him out.

"Look out, Steve!" cried Nora as he removed the gag. "He's got another gun!" She sprang up, attempting to thrust Steve aside, and then she shouted: "Get him, Wolf!"

As Steve turned, and as Trem's gun, jerked from a shoulder holster, spoke, a dark, furry form catapulted into the room. Before that weight, Trem Long went down, and long white fangs caught and held his throat. The sheep dog, having followed Steve after all, had obeyed Nora's command.

Trem Long gasped for help, fought furiously to throw off the dog. As he flung the animal aside, the dog lost his grip and

caught Trem again by the shoulder. His fangs tore away the shirt and ripped the flesh. Blood stained the floor.

"Help! Help!" Trem wailed.

Nora and Steve sprang forward together. Steve caught the dog by the tail, and Nora commanded him to retreat. But it was all Steve could do to hold him.

Then, as Trem Long got to his knees, he reached swiftly for the gun he had dropped. He raised it, but did not fire. Instead, another gun spoke, and he sank back against the wall.

"Got him!" said Shorty. "And none too soon. Yuh all made such an infernal racket yuh woke me up, jest when I was dreamin'."

"Where'd yuh get that gun?" asked Steve. "Didn't they disarm yuh when—"

"Sure," Shorty grinned. "But he ain't the only one that can wear a shoulder holster. I been totin' this extra gun ever since he promised to make trouble."

Nora was clinging to Steve's arm. "Oh, Steve!" she cried. "They went to wreck and burn your house. They were going to bring you here."

"Yeah," Shorty spoke up. "I reckon we better ride, pardner, an' see if we can save the rancho."

"Too late, I figger," said Steve. "What's a mess o' buildin's, anyway, now that you two are safe? Yore dad is all right, Nora, but we better be gettin' back to him. I'll get the horses, Shorty. You bring Nora."

"No, sir," said Shorty. "I'll get the horses an' *you* bring Nora."

The cowboy walked out, leaving Steve staring at Nora.

"What did he mean by that?" he demanded. "Ain't you an' Shorty—"

As the girl's eyes met his, he blinked.

"Nora, do you mean—"

"Oh, Steve!"

Then, incredibly, she was in his arms. He felt again the warm softness of her arms as they encircled him.

"But I thought Shorty—" he began.

"Why, Shorty just came to sing your praises, Steve. He came to tell me how fine you were, as if I didn't know! He said you were too shy to do your own courting and—"

"He did, did he?" laughed Steve joyously. "I'll show him!"

And he kissed her until she was breathless.

As they rode back toward the Graham water hole, with Shorty well in the lead, Steve looked down at the dog, trotting beside them.

"How'd the dog know where to find me, I wonder?"

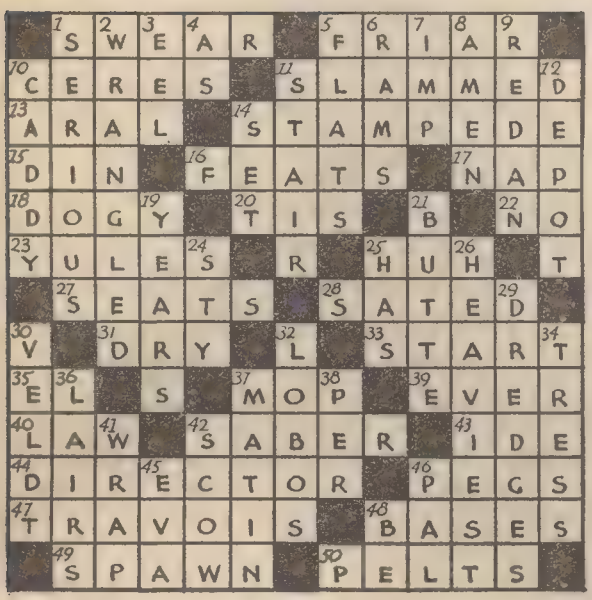
Nora blushed. "Why—I guess—I guess he knew because I've been riding over near your place, hoping I'd see you. When Dad told him to go get Steve, he knew where to go. He's—he's heard me talk about Steve. Anyway, he's a smart dog."

THINGS weren't as bad as they had expected. The sheriff, hearing that Trem Long was bent on making trouble, had sent two deputies to Steve Holden's. They had reached the ranch before Trem's men, and no damage had been done.

It wasn't long before the sheep had been sold, and the Grahams were living at Steve's.

"I'd like to go to Kootenac, boss," said Shorty one day. "Now that I've got you married, I reckon I better pay a little 'tention to my own affairs. I better go an' see Mary, down to the Kootenac Kafé."

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ The Westerners'


1 S 2 W 3 E 4 A R 5 F 6 R 7 I 8 A 9 R
10 C E R E S 11 S L A M M E 12 D
13 A R A L 14 S T A M P E D E
15 D I N 16 F E A T S 17 N A P
18 D O G 19 Y 20 T I S 21 B 22 N O
23 Y U L E 24 S R 25 H U 26 H T
27 S E A T S 28 S A T E 29 D
30 V 31 D R Y 32 L 33 S T A R 34 T
35 E 36 L S 37 M O 38 P 39 E V E R
40 L A 41 W 42 S A B E R 43 I D E
44 D I R 45 E C T O R 46 P E G S
47 T R A V O I S 48 B A S E S
49 S P A W N 50 P E L T S

Solution to the Puzzle in the Second November Number

DEFINITIONS

For the puzzle on the opposite page

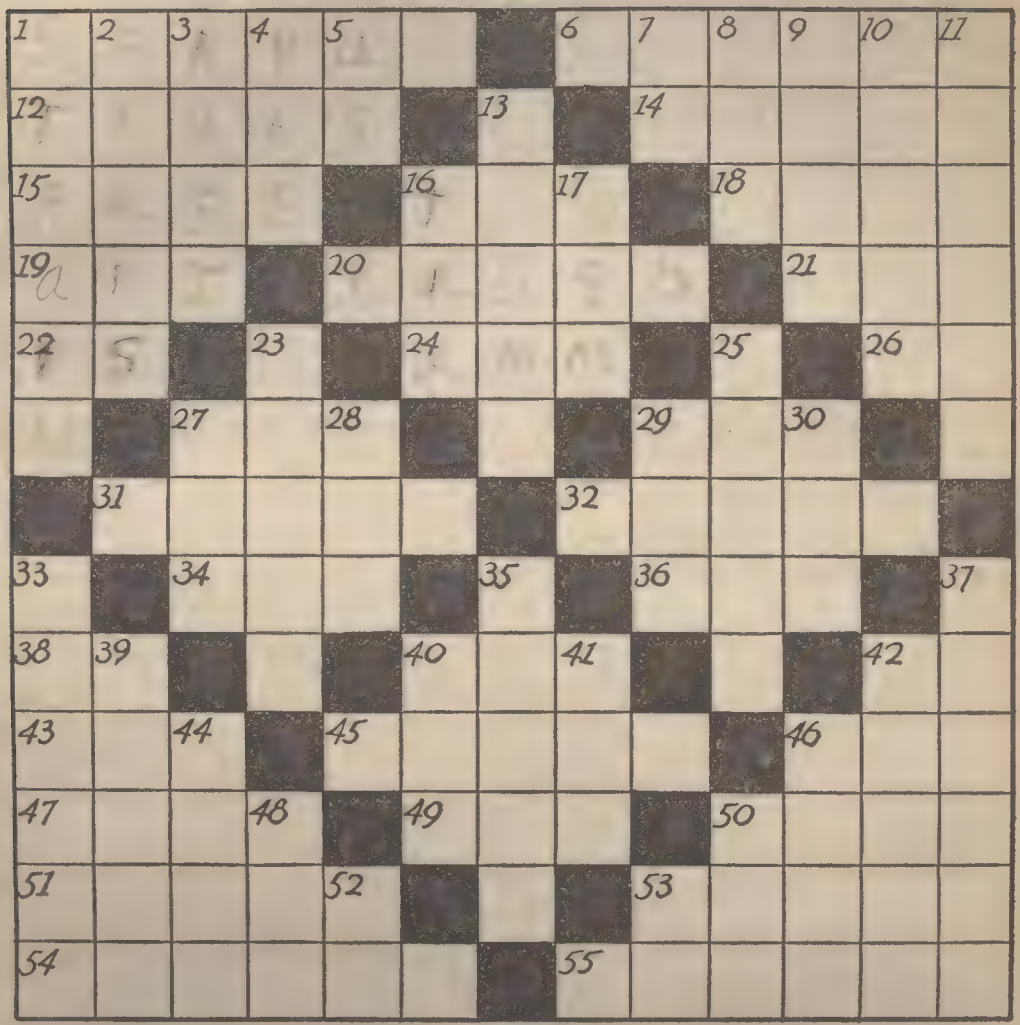
Across

1. Ranch
6. Bishops' caps
12. Excursions
14. Doctrine
15. Deception
16. Three
18. Eat dinner
19. Practical skill
20. Cowboy's rope
21. Expire
22. Exists
24. Printer's measures
26. Greek (abbr.)
27. Every one of
29. Pastry
31. Marked route
32. A drove of horses
34. Among
36. Born
38. Plural pronoun
40. Cow's call
42. Note of the scale
43. Pronoun (poss.)
45. Hello
46. First growth of a leaf
47. Crazy
49. Marry
50. Firm; solid
51. Sketches
53. Song
54. Braided cordage
55. Fellow

Down

1. Family blood
2. Gushes
3. Oxidized iron
4. Before
5. Like
7. Pronoun
8. Spread
9. Girl's name
10. Cheat at cards
11. Beeves
13. Distinguishing mark
16. Truss up
17. Same as 43, across
23. Level land
25. Short metallic pin
27. Limb
28. Cover
29. Cooking utensil
30. First woman
33. Constructs
35. Part of a spur
37. Riding gear
39. Put away for future use
41. Queer
42. Fury; rage
44. Scrutinize
46. End of an arrow
48. Possess
50. Hind quarter of a hog
52. Yes (Mex.)
53. Company (abbr.)

Crossword Puzzle . . .



Watch for the Second December Number for the solution to this puzzle. Meanwhile, don't forget to drop us a line, giving us your opinion about this new department. If you like these puzzles, and want them continued, let us know. It's all up to you, for Ranch Romances is your magazine.

Some Fellow Members

The names of these members appear on Page 446.

See Page 446 for

of the Trail's End Club

The names of these members appear on Page 446.

Trail's End coupon.

OUR AIR

OUR AIR MAIL is running daily between the editorial office of RANCH ROMANCES and its readers throughout the world. RANCH ROMANCES is not published for anyone but the reader, and we want you to look upon this magazine as something distinctly your own. Write and tell us exactly the kind of story that you think ought to go into it. And we want to help make friends for our readers. We want to help you to know friends who are thousands of miles away, or within a stone's throw of your own town. OUR AIR MAIL will be glad to forward and exchange letters. The Editor reserves the right to read and turn over to the Postal Authorities, if necessary, anything that is not in keeping with the clean, outdoor spirit of RANCH ROMANCES. Be sure to enclose postage for letters sent by OUR AIR MAIL. Moreover, this department is intended only for readers who actually wish correspondents. Henceforth, each letter must bear the written signature of the writer, and anyone fraudulently signing someone else's name will be investigated.

THREE CHEERS FOR R. R.

Dear Editor:

Three cheers for Ranch Romances. It certainly is one keen magazine. I have been reading it for over a year now, and haven't missed a single issue.

Please print this in your "Our Air Mail" columns, as I am most anxious for pen pals.

I am an eighteen-year-old brunette, have dark blue eyes, and a good coat of tan. My pastimes are dancing and horseback riding. I will send a snapshot of myself to the first ten who write me.

Come on, boys and girls, between the ages of eighteen and thirty, fill my mail box with letters. I guarantee to answer every letter.

Sincerely yours,
LORENE GRETENC.

Rte. 6,
Ottawa, Ill.

THRILLING MOMENTS

Dear Editor:

I am a Western girl, and am an ardent reader of Ranch Romances. It's the best ever.

I live in the glorious Southwest, and find life out here intensely interesting. Something thrilling seems to be happening almost all the time. Want to hear of some of the experiences, pals?

Anyone interested in the movies, aviation, navy life, camping in the mountains or desert, please write. I would also like to hear from those interested in leather work or handicraft of any kind. I have traveled a bit, and have certainly enjoyed it.

I have a wonderful collection of pictures from all over the world, which I would like to exchange with pen pals.

I'll try my best to write interesting letters. Won't you, pals, give me a trial?

Best of luck to R. R.

ALICE COLEMAN.

322—5th Ave.,
San Diego, Calif.

CHEERFUL HENRY

Dear Editor:

I have read Ranch Romances for a number of years, and thought I would like to try my luck at getting my letter published.

I am a sailor on the "Black Hawk," which is a part of the Asiatic Squadron, and have traveled quite a bit. I am twenty years old, have light brown hair, blue eyes, and am always looking at the bright side of life.

Come on, girls and boys, from sixteen to thirty-six, fill my mail box. I promise to answer every letter received. I would especially like to hear from Southerners and Westerners. I will exchange snaps, and will also tell about my travels.

Respectfully yours,
"HENRY."

Henry T. Brady,
U. S. S. Black Hawk, 3rd Div.,
c/o Postmaster,
Seattle, Wash.

MAIL

DON'T DISAPPOINT "JACKIE"

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of Ranch Romances, and I think it is the best magazine that I have ever read.

I am sixteen years old, have light brown hair and blue eyes. I would like to have pen pals from all over the world.

Come on, boys and girls, get up your courage and write to me. I'm willing to exchange snapshots with everyone. Don't disappoint me now.

Good luck to R. R.

"JACKIE."

Ruby Annable,
Rte. 2,
Alliance, Nebr.

COME ON, GIRLS

Dear Editor:

I have been reading R. R. for quite some time, and I must say that I derive a great deal of enjoyment from the stories.

I am just a lonely sailor serving on the U. S. S. Langley, and would welcome letters from near and far. I am fond of all sports, and have done a little traveling.

I am twenty years old, have light hair and blue eyes. Come on, girls, I promise to write interesting letters.

Wishing R. R. the best of luck.

Sincerely,

RAY GRADY.

U. S. S. Langley,
San Diego, Calif.

A NEW READER

Dear Editor:

I am a new Ranch Romances reader, and I'm going to continue to read it because I think it is one of the best magazines I have ever seen.

I want everyone to write to me. I'll exchange snapshots and answer all letters; so, come on, folks, write.

I am twenty-two years old, six feet tall, and have dark brown hair and black eyes. I am fond of all outdoor sports.

Wishing Ranch Romances the best of luck and continued success,

Yours truly,

HAZARD MONEY.

10 Bates Ave.,
Anthony, R. I.

MANY NEW READERS

Dear Editor:

I have tried before to break in "Our Air Mail" corner, but had no success. I will try and try again until my plea for pen pals is heard.

I would like to hear from folks between twenty-six and thirty-six. I am interested in every little nook in this grand old world, so no matter where you are, write to me.

I am five feet four and one-quarter inches tall, have brown naturally curly hair and gray-blue eyes. I like all sports, but I am especially fond of dancing, reading and writing.

I enjoy reading Ranch Romances very much. Here's wishing it every success and many new readers.

Sincerely,

EDNA MAY.

3759 Wilton Ave.,
c/o Apt. 24,
Chicago, Ill.

ATTENTION: FAIR SEX

Dear Editor:

I am sending in my plea for pen pals to help me pass my lonely hours. I am a member of Trail's End Club, and would like to hear from other members of the club who see this plea.

I have brown hair, gray eyes, and am five feet seven inches tall. I am twenty-seven years of age. Now if there is any member of the fair sex who likes this description, please write to a lonesome fellow.

I will be looking forward to seeing my letter printed, and I also hope to get oodles of pen pals through this wonderful column—"Our Air Mail."

Wishing Ranch Romances everlasting success, I am,

"BILL."

William L. Sherwin,
4202 N. Whipple St.,
Chicago, Ill.

A REMEDY FOR BLUES

Dear Editor:

When I'm blue and lonely, and wish for excitement, I grab a copy of Ranch Romances and read a story or two before I'm contented.

I always observe the "Our Air Mail," but have never so far as thought of joining in with the correspondents. I have experienced several changes and have now changed my mind.

I am nineteen years old, five feet six inches tall, fairly

well built, and possess blue eyes and brown hair. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snapshots with anyone throughout the U. S. and also foreign possessions and countries.

I could stand a whole mail bag of "Our Air Mail" letters, so let's see some thrilling maneuvers this way.

STANLEY KRESAL.

915 E. 47th St.
Chicago, Ill.

MARGIE CRASHED THE GATES

Dear Editor:

What's the matter? Here I've been trying to crash your gates for more than a dozen times, but it seems as though I'm not strong enough. Will you or won't you please print this plea for pen pals?

I am a young California maid, age twenty, I have chestnut brown hair, blue-gray eyes, fair complexion and am five feet four inches tall. My hobbies are dancing and hiking.

At present I own a grocery store, but find lots of time on hand. If all you pen pals will write; married, single, old or young, I solemnly promise to answer every letter promptly. I'm good at promises, I am.

"MARGIE."

Margie Sylveria,
General Delivery,
Oakland, Calif.

HOW ABOUT IT, LONESOME FOLKS

Dear Editor:

May a lonely girl join "Our Air Mail"? This is my first letter, and I hope I will receive lots and lots of answers from boys and girls around my own age.

I am twenty-four, five feet seven inches in height, and weigh one hundred and twenty-one pounds. Have dark brown hair and brown eyes.

I want to have lots of pen pals, so please all of you lonesome folks write to me. I will answer all letters and exchange photos. I like to do most everything in sports.

Hoping you will print my name, and wishing you the best of luck,

Sincerely yours,
RUTH DECKER.

20 Plunkett St.,
Pittsfield, Mass.

EAGER FOR PEN PALS

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader and admirer of Ranch Romances for several years. I am very eager to obtain pen pals and will exchange snapshots and letters with anyone who will write me.

I am a brunette, five feet three inches in height, and fond of all outdoor sports.

Here's hoping my success in receiving pen pals will be as great as yours in producing a wonderful magazine.

Sincerely,
MARY MILES ALLEN.

820 Cooper St.,
Memphis, Tenn.

BE A SPORT

Dear Editor:

I regret to say that my calling does not allow my being a regular reader of R. R., though for some time now I have managed to get hold of every issue. I usually have to rely on picking them up just when and where I can. Needless to say, I fully appreciate the efforts of yourself and the various authors in producing such a splendid publication.

May I "gate-crash" into "Our Air Mail" at the first attempt? Am at present serving in China and need pen pals. I am twenty-six years of age, have light brown hair, blue eyes, normally fair complexion but just now rather sunburned. Fond of all sports, both indoor and out. Will exchange snaps. Come on, all you Romancers, be sporty and write to a lonely sailor.

Sincerely,
E. A. W. SPARKS.

P. S.—Should Edna Nelson or Emma Beam of Center, Colo,. see this, will they please write?
No. 6 Mess.; H. M. S. Moth,
c/o H. M. S. Tamar, Hong Kong, China.

WESTERN MUSKETEERS

Dear Editor:

The three musketeers of the West wish to join the ranks of "Our Air Mail," and hope to be accepted. We are readers of Ranch Romances, and after a year's reading it is still our choice. There is no other magazine like good old R. R.

We are true Westerners, and enjoy all kinds of sports and outdoor life. We would like to receive letters from pen pals from everywhere, and promise to answer all letters received.

Bob is five feet eight inches in height; brown hair and brown eyes; twenty-three years old. Merle is six feet; blond hair, blue eyes, and twenty years old. Ivan is five feet eleven inches; black hair and gray eyes, and is twenty-two. We will be glad to tell more about ourselves, and exchange snapshots with anyone who writes.

Wishing R. R. continued success,

Sincerely,
IVAN LEWIS,
MERLE CORNELISON,
ROBERT GILL.

Round Mountain, Nevada.

MISS SIXTEEN

Dear Editor:

I have been reading R. R. for a year, and am not happy until I have read each issue thoroughly.

I am a girl of sixteen, with gray eyes and curly blond hair. Come on, boys and girls, write to me and I'll answer all letters immediately. I like all sports and am especially fond of dancing.

Here's wishing R. R. more success than ever.

Sincerely,
JANE FURNISS.

602 Lauderdale St.,
Selma, Alabama.

A PAIR OF SIX-FOOTERS

Dear Editor:

This is our second attempt to crash "Our Air Mail," and I hope we will succeed this time. We are constant readers of the R. R., and haven't yet found a magazine that can beat it.

We are soldiers. We will answer all letters, so come on, pen pals, and throw a little ink our way. We are both twenty-two, and six feet in height. Will try to tell more in the letters.

Sincerely,
IRVIN R. COLE,
C. D. WARREN.

Batry. C, 16th C. A.,
Fort Ruger, Honolulu, T. H.

LONESOME ON DESTROYER

Dear Editor:

I have been reading Ranch Romances for quite a while, and like it very much.

I am very anxious to obtain a lot of pen pals, and will gladly swap letters and photographs with anyone who can find time to write to me.

I am a lonely sailor, doing duty on the U. S. S. Destroyer, "Borie." I am tall, have dark brown hair and brown eyes, and twenty years old.

Hoping to see this in print real soon, I am,

Yours very truly,
EVERETTE E. WALDEN.

U. S. S. Borie,
San Diego, Calif.

JEAN WANTS PALS

Dear Editor:

Never before have I tried to crash "Our Air Mail," so let's hope this attempt is successful.

I am very interested in letter writing and should like to hear from boys and girls everywhere that your great magazine travels.

I am sixteen years old, a senior at high school; dark hair, brown eyes, fair skin.

Please folks, dig into your pockets for three cents and write to me.

Sincerely,
JEAN WEISHAMPEL.

618 E. 26th St.,
Paterson, N. J.

HELP TO FILL MAILBOX

Dear Editor:

I'll just fly into "Our Air Mail" port to see if I can pick up a few pen pals and I hope I succeed in getting many—both boys and girls.

I am a girl of eighteen years; five feet four and a half inches in height; brown hair and brown eyes; olive complexion. I am fond of swimming, dancing, football and baseball. I also like to write letters. I will exchange snapshots and postal cards, and promise to answer every letter.

Hoping to hear from many, I am,

Sincerely yours,
OLGA LIZANA.

3904 Orleans Street,
New Orleans, La.

ENJOYS LETTERS

Dear Editor:

Let's all give a "Royal 15" for Ranch Romances, the best magazine on the market. I'm always ready for each new issue. It's hard to tell which is the more interesting —"Our Air Mail" or the stories, but anyway, I want to show everyone how much I enjoy the letters. I have answered many letters and now I want to see how many will answer my plea.

Since it is customary to give one's description, here it is: I am eighteen years old; a blonde, with blue eyes and fair complexion, and about five feet three inches in height. Have lots of pep and am fond of all outdoor sports.

Hoping to find the mailman loaded down, so I can hear him grumble, and wishing R. R. best of luck, I am,

Yours sincerely,
"SKEETER ROCK."

Elnora Rock,
902 Kirby St., Lake Charles, La.

AN ISOLATED SOLDIER

Dear Editor:

I am certainly well pleased with R. R. magazine. Although I am not able to get it very often, through being stationed in an outlandish fort, I look forward to the day when I am able to receive the magazine, and I think it is the best ever.

I am a soldier in the British Army, and am looking for pen pals from far and near. Although I am not much of a pen-pusher, I will certainly try to answer promptly all letters received.

Here's wishing your magazine the best of luck,

Sincerely yours,
LONESOME SOLDIER.

Bdr. Sleith S. 805767
19th (Eyres) Heavy Bty. R. A., Fort Carlisle,
N. Whitegate, Co. Cork, Ireland.

WANT TO BE FIRST?

Dear Editor:

If I remember correctly, this is my second attempt to crash the gates of "Our Air Mail." Won't you please print my plea for pen pals? I want everyone to write—girls and boys, cowboys and sailors—so please don't disappoint me.

I am seventeen years old, I have brown hair and brown eyes. I will exchange snapshots with the first fifteen. Who will be first?

I have been a constant reader of Ranch Romances for the past three years, and wish it lots of success.

Sincerely,
DOLORES GUZMAN.

210 Dabner St.,
San Leandro, Calif.

SALLY HAS SUCCEEDED

Dear Editor:

I have read the Double R since Scarum was a nine-year-old girl, and can truthfully say I like it better than any other magazine. I have exchanged letters with the other readers, but this is my first attempt to get a letter published in "Our Air Mail." I hope I am successful, for I want lots of pen pals. Anyone is welcome to write, and I would especially like to hear from folks living in Arizona, Utah and Colorado. I am twenty-three, have brown hair and gray eyes, and am five feet four inches tall.

I am hoping to get lots and lots of nice, friendly letters.

Sincerely,
SALLY ALLEN.

403 Court St.,
Charleston, W. Va.

A REAL PAL FROM VIRGINIA

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of the Double R for quite a while, and I sure must say I enjoy reading the wonderful stories published within it. They are so clean and interesting.

I am a girl of nineteen, have blue eyes, brown hair, and am five feet four inches tall. I am very fond of all outdoor sports, especially hiking. I am also a great lover of music.

Say, if there are any cowboys, aviators, soldiers, or anyone who would care to have a real pen pal from old Virginia, just let me hear from you. I will try to answer every letter received. Please send snaps if possible.

Wishing Ranch Romances good luck in the future and hoping to see my letter in print, I remain,

Sincerely,
SARAH HOOD.

Rte. 1, Box 172,
Big Stone Gap, Virginia.

FOUND A LITTLE SPACE

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of Ranch Romances for quite some time, and I think it is a fine book.

I wonder if you could find a little space for a girl of sixteen who would like to have some pen pals. I promise faithfully to answer all letters from boys and girls between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. I will exchange pictures with those who wish to do so.

Wishing your book the best of success, I am,

Sincerely,
MILDRED OLIVA.

18 Collins St.,
Hartford, Conn.

GINGER AND BLONDE

Dear Editor:

This is our second attempt to "crash the gates" to your arena of pen pals. Be good-hearted and let a couple of lonesome girls get by.

My sister and I want some pen pals to help pass away some awfully lonesome hours. Susie is five feet four inches tall, has ginger hair, dark blue eyes, fair complexion, and is nineteen years old. She loves all sports but cannot take part in many of them because of her health. Her weakness is music and dancing.

There's nothing much to tell about myself. I am five feet six inches tall, blonde, blue-gray eyes, fair complexion, and twenty-one years of age. I like so many things, I couldn't begin to write about them. Cowboys, rangers, soldiers, sailors—everybody write.

We cannot suggest anything more that you could add to Ranch Romances. It ought to be put out every week.

Sincerely,
S. H. ERICKSON.
H. S. ERICKSON.

106 So. Gaylord St.,
Butte, Montana.

A YEARNING FOR PEN PALS

Dear Editor:

I want to express my thanks to you for publishing such a wonderful magazine as Ranch Romances.

I am yearning for pen pals and hope that everybody will write to me and fill my lonesome hours. I am fifteen years old, blonde with blue eyes and fair complexion, five feet four and a half inches tall.

Will all you cowboys and cowgirls and everybody else please send a little ink this way? Please! I promise to answer everyone.

Hoping to get loads of letters, I am,

Sincerely yours,
ELEANOR BODENSTAB.

903 N. Central Ave.,
Austin Sta., Chicago, Ill.

MADE IT THIS TIME

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of Ranch Romances for a long time, and think it is the best magazine that has ever been published.

This is my second attempt to crash the gates of "Our Air Mail." Do you think I can make it this time? I would like to hear from boys and girls from all parts of the United States, and I guarantee to answer all letters I receive.

I am eighteen years of age, have blue eyes, brown hair, and am six feet two inches in height.

Hoping to see this in print real soon, I am,

Sincerely yours,
CECIL BETZ.

1211 West 23rd St.,
Vancouver, Wash.

ANSWER BOB'S PLEA

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of R. R. for quite some time and hope to be for quite some time to come. I believe it is the best magazine printed. It hasn't been until recently, however, that I have taken any interest in "Our Air Mail." Now I am anxious to correspond with all the pen pals who will answer this plea. I would like to especially hear from cowgirls or any others, for that matter.

I am eighteen years old, have dark brown hair and brown eyes. I have traveled a great deal through the East and Middlewest and am interested in all sports. I promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
BOB.

Robert P. Kephart,
32 E. Seymour St.,
Germantown, Phila., Pa.

Whom Shall I Marry?

By Professor Marcus Mari

DECEMBER

SAGITTARIUS

SAGITTARIUS governs until December twentieth. People of this sign are optimistic, direct, impatient, and go to extremes in everything.

They are zealous in their work, and use up so much nervous force in the execution of the project which interests them at the moment that they sometimes injure their splendid constitutions. They are ceaselessly active, and when compelled to give up work become discontented, restless, and apt to find fault with everything and everyone.

They are frank in their manner and speech, and detest secretiveness in anything. They cannot understand those who are less direct than themselves in speech and action.

They have a rather disconcerting way of questioning others, because their keen intuition leads them so close to the truth that, with a few clever questions, they force a person either to divulge what he would prefer to keep secret or to seek refuge in lies. The Sagittarius person despises lies and does not realize that in delving into others' affairs he frequently drives them to prevarication.

Sagittarius people are warmhearted, genial, and attract many friends. So deep is their friendship that grief over the loss of a friend is so bitter and lasting as sometimes to impair their health.

The sensitive, impetuous Sagittarius nature will find congenial companionship in Leo and Aries; and with those born under Scorpio, Capricorn, and Aquarius they will find the happiest marriage.

Professor Mari will give a personal reading to readers who fill out the coupon.

Name ..... Sex.....

Address.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date.....

Always use this coupon and enclose stamped envelope. 12-8-33

GEE... I'd sure like to have real HE-MAN muscles!
So would I, but it takes a long while
CHARLES ATLAS
Holder of the title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" won in open competition in the only national and international contest held during the past 15 years.
No other Physical Instructor in the World has ever DARED to make the offer he makes in this announcement.

"Bunk!" —says CHARLES ATLAS

"I'll Prove *in the first 7 days* YOU can have a Body like Mine!"

DON'T get the idea that it takes a lot of time and hard work for you to get smashing strength and powerful muscular development! And don't fool yourself into thinking that you need dumb-bells, stretchers or any other such contraptions!

Both these ideas are all bunk—and I have PROVED it. All I need is 7 *days* to prove what I can do for you! And I don't need any apparatus either. In fact, I have no sympathy with apparatus at all—don't believe in it. It is artificial—and it may strain your heart or other vital organs for life!

NATURAL Methods Are All I Need

On this page you will see an actual photo of how I look today. This picture has not been changed in any way. No muscles have been "painted on." This photograph is the camera's honest proof of what I have done for My body. I myself am ready to prove what my secret of Dynamic Tension can do for YOURS!

To look at me now you wouldn't recognize me as the same man I was a few years ago. *Then* I was a physical wreck, a 97-pound weakling—flat chested, spindly legs, arms and legs like pipe-stems.

I was worried—and I had a right to be. I decided to study myself, to do something about my body. Then I made a discovery. I found a new way to build myself up. A way that was simple, natural, quick and sure! "Dynamic Tension" is what I called it. I put this secret to work. And in a short time I had the kind of body you see here—the body which has twice won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

This Secret Has Helped Thousands

Thousands of other fellows now know this secret, too—and know from their own personal experience what Dynamic Tension has done for them. When they turned to me for advice, they were just as frail and puny as I once was. Now they are life-sized examples of what a man *can* and *ought* to be—with mighty energy, tireless endurance, and muscles that stand out like bridge-cables all over their bodies.

I have written an interesting booklet, filled with pictures, which tells my story—and theirs. I would like to send you a copy of it entirely free.

Let Me Send You My Free Book

I'd like you to know what Dynamic Tension has done for me—what it has done for others—and what it can do for you! This little coupon will bring you my free book, which tells all about it. There is no cost or obligation of any kind—and no one will call upon you.

I just want to put into your hands proof that I can do for you what I have done for so many thousands of others: give you broad, powerful shoulders, biceps that bulge with smashing strength, a chest which stands out solid and muscular, and an evenly developed body that will make others look like dwarfs next to you.

Will you gamble a stamp to win a body like mine? Then mail this coupon TODAY! CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9-12, 133 East 23rd St., N. Y. C.

FREE BOOK

Gamble a stamp today. Mail coupon for free copy of my new book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." It shows you from actual photos how I have developed my pupils to my own perfectly balanced proportions. Where shall I send your copy? Jot your name and address down on the coupon. Mail it today to me personally.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9-12
133 East 23rd Street, New York City

I want the proof that your system of Dynamic-Tension will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City.....State.....

© C. A. 1933

Copyright, 1933,
R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company

● MR. HAGENLOCHER says, "For successful billiard play, watch your nerves! . . . I've smoked Camels for years. They're milder. They never upset my nervous system."

● ABOVE—ERICH HAGENLOCHER, twice 18.2 balk-line billiard champion of the world. Healthy nerves have carried him through stern international competition to many titles.

Steady Smokers turn to Camels

"I know of no sport," says Erich Hagenlocher, "that places a greater strain on the nerves than tournament billiards. The slightest inaccuracy can ruin an important run. One simple rule for success is, 'Watch your nerves!' I have smoked Camels for years. I like their taste better and because they're milder, they never upset my nervous system."

There *is* a difference between Camel's costlier tobaccos and the tobaccos used in other popular cigarettes. You'll notice the difference in taste and in mildness—and Camels *never* jangle your nerves. You can prove this yourself. Begin today!

IT IS MORE FUN TO KNOW

Camels are made from finer, MORE EXPENSIVE tobaccos than any other popular brand . . . . They give more pleasure. Your own taste will confirm this.

Camel's Costlier Tobaccos

NEVER GET ON YOUR NERVES
NEVER TIRE YOUR TASTE

First December, 1933 RANCH RO

SCAN COURTSEY OF
EXCITER